

9



To ra do ra !

STORY YUYUKO TAKEMIYA ART YASU

VISIT...

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VOLUME 9

story **Yuyuko Takemiya**

illustrations **Yasu**



Aisaka
Taiga



Kawashima
Ami



Kushieda
Minori

TORADORA!



Toradora!

BY
Yuyuko Takemiya

ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasu



Seven Seas Entertainment

TORADORA! Vol. 9

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Chapter 1

O_w.

Hearing a voice, he strained his ears, but the fierce gusts of snow drowned out the quiet sound. He looked around the world smothered in white, feeling like he might be blown away. Even when he tried looking in the direction the voice had come from, shards of ice danced dizzily around him and seemed to slice at his skin. He couldn't even open his eyes.

I fell... It hurts.

He heard the voice again; it sounded incredibly weak. *I have to find her faster*, he urged himself. But the sub-zero storm blew straight at him, and he took one step backward and then another.

Nestled in the pure white snow, he saw an even whiter fingertip.

He saw her slender wrist, her little elbow, her shoulders—then he saw her face, buried in the snow.

He tried desperately to move forward. He was wholly focused on trying to save her, pushing his snow boots through the drift that they were buried in. He reached out his hand and tried to grab those fingers.

But...

I can't anymore.

Unable to reach her, unable to make it in time, he began to slip.

“AHHHHHHH TAIGAAAAAAA!”

The moment he cried out, he felt like he had fallen down.

“Whoa! That...was...a surprise!”

When he moved his fingers to cover his mouth in shock, he realized they were trembling with a terrible force. The palms of his hands were slick with sweat, and when he touched his lips, he tasted salt.

It was a dream. Just a little nightmare.

Takasu Ryuuji continued to tremble intensely. Every muscle in his body was stiff; he couldn't relax. It almost felt like the back of his school jacket would burst right open, allowing the demon king inside to slither out.

I'm glad it was a dream, but what—

"A-are you okay? How about you take a seat again, all right?"

Ryuuji raised his face at the urging voice, finally regaining a sense of reality. He was in the middle of the classroom, standing as stick-straight as a wooden doll. He faced the teacher's platform, where the bachelorette (age 30) Koigakubo Yuri stood. His other classmates silently watched his demonic molting from their seats.

"S...sorry! I guess...I-I was half-asleep..."

Flustered, Ryuuji sat back down and covered his face, which felt like it was on fire. He was supremely embarrassed.

The last thing he remembered was putting his head down on his desk after class had ended. He'd closed his eyes, tired of waiting for the homeroom teacher to go through the final motions that would officially end the school day.

"It's fine. It's all right. Yeah, of course. This isn't your fault."

Clasping her fingers together at the V-neck of her sweater, the bachelorette (age 30) seemed strangely calm as she nodded at him. Her voice softened kindly in a way that didn't suit speaking to a student who had fallen asleep in the middle of homeroom. "Having someone as close as Aisaka-san get lost on the mountain must have been traumatic for you, right?"

As though echoing their teacher's kindness, his other classmates didn't even make fun of Ryuuji for shouting Taiga's name in his sleep. In his seat at the very front of the classroom, Kitamura Yuusaku turned around, echoing "Right, right..."

Kushieda Minori turned around from the seat near the hallway. "Right, right..."

Ryuuji was sure that Haruta and Noto were going "Right, right..." behind him,

too. The only one who pretended not to notice was Kawashima Ami, who was looking outside from her window seat.

“Now that you’re awake, Takasu-kun, remember to bring that printout tomorrow.”

Ryuuji noticed the printout that had been set on his desk while he was sleeping. It was a future aspirations questionnaire with blank spaces for answers to be filled in.

“We’ll use your answers in a parent-teacher interview to decide how the classes will be organized next year. I’m just repeating myself for the rest of you, but don’t forget it, everyone. Now, what do you say?”

Haphazard replies of *yuh* and *aight* sounded from all over the classroom while Ryuuji took in a deep, deep breath. He held his head in both his hands and curled his back like a shrimp in distress as he looked at the printout.

Who cared about his aspirations? Trauma, schrauma.

It had been a whole week since the school trip. Even the muscle soreness from his novice attempts to ski were already long gone, and all that remained were the memories. The fun things, the things that hadn’t gone so great, the things he had smiled about, and the things he hadn’t—among those memories, the folder on Aisaka Taiga was especially and unnecessarily large.

She had fallen off a snowy cliff.

Ow...

She had gone missing in a blizzard.

I fell... It hurts.

The blood dripping from her forehead. The paleness of her throat as her head tilted limply back.

Oh...Kitamura-kun?

And to top it off, she had mistaken Ryuuji, who had gone down the cliff to save her, for Kitamura. In her haze, that girl—Taiga—had told him something she shouldn’t have.

My feelings for Ryuuji just won't go away.

“Agh...”

Ryuuji didn't even care about crumpling his printout as he put his head right down on his desk. *BAM!* The sound he made was pretty loud, but everyone seemed intent on pretending they hadn't heard it for his sake.

He inhaled a lungful of the smell of his desk, closed his eyes, and held his breath. Whenever he remembered Taiga's words, the blizzard rose back up in his head.

I just like Ryuuji, no matter what I do. That was what Taiga said. She uttered those words as she was being held by none other than Ryuuji himself. She had completely mistaken him for Kitamura, and he couldn't correct her. After he'd climbed the cliff, the adults had whisked Taiga away to the hospital before they could talk.

So Ryuuji hadn't heard her—or, at least, he was pretending he hadn't. He was pretending that it was Kitamura who went down the cliff to save her, and Taiga hadn't said anything at all. It was only in his violently wheeling memories that Taiga's words remained.

So what was this about his future? He was still caught in the blizzard from a week ago, but they wanted to talk about next year's classes? They wanted to talk about tomorrow? About the future? His future?

Without realizing it, Ryuuji's face contorted like that of a poisoned demon. How was he supposed to think about his future in these circumstances?

“Um, Takasu-kun, we're doing the closing bows.” A girl poked him in the back.

“Oh...”

Ryuuji quickly raised his face. Everyone else had already long since stood up, and all they needed to do was give their homeroom teacher a bow of farewell at Kitamura's signal. His classmates pretended not to notice Ryuuji's chair clatter as he stood up and lowered his head along with them.

The homeroom teacher stepped down from the teacher's platform and left the classroom. 2-C was immediately seized with after-school clamor. Laughter

and conversations erupted all around.

Taiga's small form had yet to return to the midst of that din.

She'd left Ryuuji behind by himself in the blizzard world. Actually, she might have just run away. She wasn't at her condo. She hadn't come back since the school trip. The bachelorette (age 30) had said that Taiga's mother took her away but that she had gotten sick and was recuperating at a hotel in Tokyo. He didn't know if that was true or not. Her phone had been out of service the whole time, and he couldn't get a hold of her.

Ryuuji scowled even more sullenly. His sanpaku eyes seemed to glare at Taiga's seat as though he were licking it. The chair appeared to shift slightly in response, but it was probably because someone had just run past.

Taiga might remember everything. She really had said that stuff, and she might remember it had happened, and she might have realized that the person she said it to wasn't Kitamura but Ryuuji himself, and she might be planning to never come back again. That was how far Ryuuji's thoughts had gone.

Even though school was over, Ryuuji couldn't start walking. He pried his eyes away from the empty seat, but the blizzard inside his mind refused to subside.

The icy storm from that day was still freezing him in place, even now.

If he could see the real Taiga safe and sound—if he could only see her face and hear her voice—then he might be able to escape from that blizzard world.

"It's coooooold~! And the line's not moving an inch~! Phooo~!"

"But four people just came out together... Ugh, standing still like this is making me even colder!"

"What time is it? Whoa!"

His cell phone told him it was already five. After checking that he hadn't gotten any messages, Ryuuji closed the flip phone and rubbed his gloved hands together so fast he could almost have started a fire with them.

The sun had already set, and the cars and trucks traveling along the national highway next to him lit up white, reflecting the light. Now that they were in

February, the temperature had dropped below freezing. The moment the dusk wind blew, its intensity and coldness made the high school boys close their mouths for a moment. Spring seemed like it would never come.

Noto held his headphones, which were playing nothing, in his trembling hands (he didn't look cute at all). His already tiny eyes squinted even smaller.

"Saying it doesn't help, but it's so cold! I guess the colder it is, the better the ramen tastes, but there's a limit! I wonder how much longer it'll take?"

"I think we've gotten more than halfway through the line, but actually—whoa! There's a huge line behind us now. It's going all the way over to that light!"

"Hey, don't get out of line. Everyone's out for blood right now. They'll cut in front of you."

Grabbing Haruta's hood as his friend staggered away from the line, Ryuuji bowed his head slightly to the group of students behind him. They apologized furiously—*S-s-s-sorry! Oh, no, it's my bad. No really*—and he and the students went into a loop of bowing their heads back and forth at each other for nearly five seconds.

The line of people on the national highway sidewalk continued past the next street corner. At the head of that line waited incredibly popular, steaming hot, and toasty ramen and tsukemen, but there were just too many people ahead of the three of them. If the restaurant announced that the broth had run out or something, they might just start to cry.

The restaurant that Ryuuji, Noto, and Haruta were waiting to enter was a popular chain that had opened a few days ago near their school. Noto and Haruta had invited Ryuuji there—probably because of the whole "Taiga!" incident—and the three of them had made their way over. They knew from word around school that there were ridiculously long lines, but they'd had no idea the wait would be this bad.

"Actually, sorry, Takasu. I didn't think it'd be this big of a deal. You've got to go shopping for dinner, right? Are you gonna be okay? Will you have enough time?" Noto asked Ryuuji as he shivered. Ryuuji waved his hand, *No, no*.

“It’s nice trying out ramen that’s popular enough to have a line like this. It’s not like I could come here alone. We made it this far, so we’ve got to eat before we go home.”

“Ughh, I don’t wanna go home.”

Ryuuji and Noto turned to Haruta, who sniffled as he corrected himself, “Well, I wanna eat the ramen, but I don’t wanna go home.”

“Wait, what’d you do? Did you break a vase or something? Did you rip a hanging scroll?”

“Did you break your gramps’s bonsai? Did you draw eyebrows on your dog?”

“My gramps already kicked the bucket a while ago, and I don’t have a dog. It’s more serious than that...like, it makes me sad to say it myself, but I’m an idiot, right...”

Yeah, we know, Ryuuji and Noto nodded vigorously.

“And I’ve got super bad grades, right...and I need to talk to my parents about this future aspiration stuff, and that’s really been weighing on me...”

Ryuuji sighed as he recalled the printout. Haruta and he exchanged looks that cried, *I don’t wanna*.

Meanwhile, Noto seemed quite optimistic about it.

“It’s not like we really have to worry about it until next year’s exam season,” he said. “All they’re using it for right now is to split up the classes, anyway.”

Noto looked up at Haruta, whose nose was running.

“Come to think of it,” he said, “are you planning on doing the humanities course? Or are you trying for the science course?”

“Uh...I’m not even thinking about which course to take... I might not even graduate... Yuri-chan’s been telling me this for a while, but I really might not even graduate at this rate... She even went out of her way to call my place this time. When she told them that, my parents got all down. Well, I guess maybe the humanities course would be better. If I did the science course, I’d get in trouble with all the math eventually. You’re definitely gonna be in the humanities course, right, Noto-chi?”

Noto nodded. He was a strange specimen whose only natural aptitude was in language.

“Yeah. So, I’ll get into a literature department somewhere, sneak into a publishing company, edit a music magazine, and eventually become a freelancer! I’m gonna become a review writer. I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

“Whoa, you’ve been saying that for a while, haven’t you, Noto-chi~? I’d be happy just graduating. If I could get a recommendation, I might try college, but I don’t really care about majoring in anything. I guess if nothing else, I could just help out at my dad’s work.”

“What do your parents do again, Haruta?”

“Interiors.”

Interiors...?

“My dad’s, like, an artisan. It’s so cool. Plus, I heard they make a killing.”

He means interior decoration... After figuring out what Haruta was talking about, Ryuuji stared at them both.

“This is kind of rude, but I like...didn’t expect you both to actually be thinking about the future. I kind of feel like I’ve been left behind.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Noto breathed white out of his nose and jokingly hit Ryuuji’s shoulders (it wasn’t cute). “You’ve got a good head, Takasu, so you don’t gotta worry about the future. You’re good at math, and you’re in the science course, right? You and Master Kitamura have probably got the national selection in the bag.”

The high school they went to was unofficially considered a college-bound school. Every student there was expected to go to college. When they became third years, they were divided into three science classes and three literature classes, making six classes in total. Those with the best grades would be put into the national selection track, which was divided into two classes (one for the sciences and one for humanities), limited to twenty-five students each. In the past, students who did well would just go to local public colleges, but there were a lot of people who got into selective private schools now. Kanou Sumire,

who went overseas before graduating, had been in the school's national selection science course.

"But I've heard rumors that the national selection course goes pretty fast," said Ryuuji. "They apparently cover everything we're supposed to learn in our third year in one semester, and they just study for exams or something after that. I think I could get in with my grades...but I'm not sure about it. I'm not even sure I want to go to college, so I feel like the spot would be better going to someone else."

"What?! You're not going to college with *your* grades?! Are you going straight into the workforce?!"

Noto sounded hysterical, surprising Ryuuji.

"Well, my family just hasn't got any money. It's not like I want to go to a particular college or do anything specific... I'm not against studying, so I wouldn't mind being a student for four more years. So I was thinking, why not work and save up money for now and then go to college later?"

"It's not like you haven't got *any* money. Your mom's been running her shop forever, hasn't she?"

"It's owned by somebody else. She just works there. And it's not like she can work there forever... But ever since the high school entrance exams, my mom's been telling me, 'Ryuu-chan, you're going to go to college, so you have to go to a college-bound school. ☆'"

Crossing his arms together, Noto turned his face up to the dark skies. "Wait, Takasu, your nickname is Ryuu-chan..."

"Gross, right?"

As they talked, the line slowly made its way forward without them noticing. Haruta pushed at their backs.

"Okay, okay, you two, we're moving forward—forward."

"Anyway, I guess I'm not going to be in the same class as you next year, Takasu. I'm going to be with Haruta in the humanities track, so there's a chance the two of us might be in the same class, but...right, that means we're going to

be separated from Master Kitamura, too.”

“Take another step forward. It’s cold, so let’s huddle together. Ahh, it’d be such a bummer if I got separated from Noto-chi, too, and left all alone. Let’s stick together like this even if we end up in different classes. I wonder what’ll happen with the girls? Taka-chan, did you ask?”

“Ask what...?”

“Kushieda, of course. Is she in the humanities course? She looks like she would be, just judging by her face.”

“I think she’s probably humanities. Ta—” He tried to answer Haruta’s question as though nothing was up. “Taiga mentioned something about that at some point.”

It was probably because of the strong wind that blew at him and the chill that seemed to pierce right to his bones that he couldn’t get his mouth to move properly. *I see*, Haruta quietly murmured next to him. Noto nodded.

“Then it’s settled, Takasu. You’re going to be in a different class from Miss Kushieda. That must hurt. Actually, how’ve things been with her lately? You haven’t really been talking about her much.”

“Everything’s about the same as back then.”

He remembered the night of the school trip when they’d talked in the hotel lounge. His heart had been throbbing. It had been his final chance to confess, and it had been when he’d finally, clearly realized that Kushieda Minori would never like him.

Once he knew that, he couldn’t continue with his one-sided love.

“It must be awkward, then.”

“It’s not awkward so much as...I don’t know. It’s not like I’m avoiding her, though.”

“Did you give up?”

“It’s like I used up everything I had...”

He could have kept having feelings for her, even if he never got anything out

of it. He could have prepared himself to keep being hurt but also to pray for something to happen. He could have continued to believe that Minori might change her mind. He could throw himself into beautiful, extraordinary, sacrificial love. He knew he could have. He understood that was an option.

But...

“I see...” said Noto.

“Ah, well,” said Haruta, “things just turn out the way they will~!”

Ryuuji wouldn’t do that. He couldn’t do that.

He felt like the line had been drawn, not in the moment that Minori rejected his feelings but when he decided he wouldn’t, couldn’t do that. Ryuuji knew firsthand that love could end in ways other than rejecting or being rejected by someone.

Having done that, he could get a fresh start. He could do that—but he wouldn’t.

He couldn’t just move on that easily.

Just when he had given up on his unrequited feelings for Minori, he’d found out about Taiga’s. Ryuuji didn’t know why she hadn’t come back. In the end, the one who was left behind—who was abandoned—was him.

It was like he was still wandering in that blizzard, even now. He felt like a prisoner, confined in that impossible world of ice along with Taiga’s illusory voice. The real world progressed forward, day after day, and he couldn’t even tell how he would be feeling tomorrow, much less what his future would be like.

“Agh, it’s cold...”

The chill that seemed to crawl up his back made Ryuuji grit his back teeth. As he rubbed his freezing shoulders, he thought about how easy it would be to flip through the days of his past like a disposable calendar, ripping each of them off and throwing them away.

“Brighten up, Taka-chan. We’re almost to the ramen, okay?” Haruta smiled as he poked at Ryuuji’s hunched back. Ryuuji breathed out white air. “Things have

been rough for you, haven't they, Taka-chan? Kushieda rejected you on Christmas Eve, and then you got hospitalized, and then you got rejected again at the school trip, plus Taiga got lost, and now she's been out since then. Of course you feel bad."

"On the other hand, Kushieda-shi hasn't changed at all," said Noto. "If I hadn't heard it from you, Takasu, I wouldn't have known that she'd rejected a guy at all. I wonder how she's so tenacious?"

"I wonder what happened with her fight with Ami-chan," said Haruta. "It's hard to tell what's going on with women from the sidelines. Actually, did you make up with Maya-sama, Noto-chi?"

"Huh...well, she's completely ignoring me right now, of course..."

The three boys looked at each other's faces, pitifully ignorant of what to say. Ryuuji rubbed his freezing nose and ended up looking down at his own toes.

Minori was probably at softball right around then. All they'd said to each other that day was *Taiga's out today, too. I haven't been able to get a hold of her on the phone.*

The prisoner in the blizzard world fruitlessly inspected his own wounds. Love was futile—that was the only truth he knew.

"Oh, looks like the line's moving a bunch all at once."

As a rowdy group of people came out of the ramen store, the long line gradually shortened.

"Okaaay! The next three guests can now make their way in!"

When they heard the energetic voice calling them, the three of them turned to each other with faces that said "Finally!" They could put aside the chill of reality because, beyond the hanging cloth that covered the door, steaming hot ramen was waiting for them. They pushed up the deep blue cloth and finally stepped into the dim shop where the air was fogged with humidity.

"Please take three seats at the counter! Ngahh?!"

That Ngahh?! was pretty enthusiastic, too... Ryuuji thought as he looked up at the female employee putting out a glass of water for him.

“Whoa?!”

He nearly fell right out of the chair he was about to sit in but caught himself. On Ryuuji’s right, Noto dropped his bag, and on Ryuuji’s left, Haruta had taken a mouthful of water before he spat it all out with a “BFAAH?!”

“Don’t look at meeeeeeeeeeee!”

From where she was standing behind the counter, the employee squirmed.

“Just kidding! You can take a good ol’ gander at me...”

She posed proudly in front of them, a towel snugly tied around her head. She wore a black T-shirt with the name of the ramen shop on it and a matching black apron. Kushieda Minori’s mouth curved up as she chuckled “Heh heh.” She was most definitely real and made up of tangible mass.

“Oh...” Without thinking, Ryuuji pointed at her bold face. “What’re...you?!”

“I’m an employee!”

“No, but...wh-what about softball club?!”

“It’s over! The days are shorter in winter, so we wrap up earlier! But you sure surprised me. I had no idea you were all lined up out there. Well, how about I take your orders now? Also, if you say you want ‘ra-women instead of ra-men,’ I’ll poke your eyes out.”

“One ra-women.”

“A ra-women please.”

“Give me a ra-women.”

Bsht, bsht, bsht. Starting from the right, Minori’s thumb jabbed one of each of their eyes in order.

“We’re sorry! Three ramens please,” Noto said.

“Okay, good choice! Three *ramens* coming up!”

ROGER! They heard a voice rumble from the kitchen, which was at a level higher than the counter.

The busy employees going in and out from the kitchen were lit up with an

intense light. Ryuuji could see countless polished pots sitting on top of flames that glowed from the back of the kitchen. Most of the employees were men, but there were a few women, and then there was Minori. They were all drenched in sweat as they skillfully managed the customers' orders.

"So you started another job here, too?" said Ryuuji. "What happened to the family restaurant?"

Minori, reaching across the counter to wipe it down, turned toward Ryuuji. "I didn't quit, but this place has better pay, so I got two hours here to try it out."

She flashed a peace sign... No, it was a two-hour sign. Her smile was as brilliant as ever. Her smile was the definition of energetic. Minori had no concern for the change in Ryuuji's heart as she smiled at him.

"Actually, Kushieda, can you even make raaamen~? I wouldn't want your amateur raaamen after lining up outside for an hour and a half."

"Course not. I'm just on the floor. I also wash the dishes and manage the line."

"Check please!" someone called, and Minori quickly answered the person as she flew to the register. They watched her go.

"So while we were just standing around in the cold, she finished softball club and started work..." Ryuuji unconsciously mumbled. *She's way too tough.* Noto nodded slightly from beside him.

While he'd been brooding about trivial stuff like disposable calendars or whatever, Kushieda Minori had been, and still was, working. Unlike Ryuuji, she was always moving forward. She was leaving Ryuuji further and further behind. The distance between them only widened. With the desperation of an animal that would die if it stopped moving, she couldn't even pause to talk to Ryuuji, the one she had shaken off.

They were both only human, and even the same age, so why were they so different? Maybe it was a question of what kind of drive a person was born with. But in that case, hadn't he already lost by a large margin?

"Why are you always working so much?" Noto asked Minori as she took away some bowls on the tables. She adeptly piled the bowls on top of each other as

she used her free hand to busily wipe down the table.

“Because our second year ends in just two months. It’s my last spurt before I head to the finish line.”

Come to think of it, Minori hadn’t given Ryuuji a clear answer when he had asked her something similar in the past. He felt like Taiga had once mentioned not knowing why Minori worked so hard, either.

“No chitchat, part-timer! Get the bowls cleared!”

Minori’s shoulders jerked up when she heard the sudden shout. “That’s the boss. His eyes are gonna open soon.” She ran off, leaving them with those parting words. Ryuuji and the others looked at each other.

“His eyes? Are gonna open?”

“Are his eyes always closed or something? Isn’t that dangerous?”

In that moment, the whole restaurant suddenly went silent. The customers’ eyes went beyond the counter to a lone middle-aged man who was illuminated with light. The man’s eyes were firmly closed.

Is he going to open them? one of the guests gulped.

What the heck is he doing?

Fwoosh! The man’s eyes opened.

“Special technique—reincarnation cycle!”

He grabbed several netted ladles filled with balled-up ramen noodles from a gigantic, boiling pot. Then he hurled the steaming noodles around and spun them vertically. The hot water that flew off the noodles landed right on the trio’s faces.

“Hot, hot, hot, hot, hot!”

Though they didn’t know it as they writhed at being splattered by boiling water, this was a demonstration that only the normally close-eyed chef could do. In the restaurant (which was named Zodiac), this was the chef’s method of straining water from the ramen noodles.

This is dangerous! Ryuuji bent back, but the other guests were entranced,

thrusting their heads out as they tried to get even a drop of boiling water on their own faces.

The ramen had been good, but Ryuuji ended up getting home later than expected.

He had wrapped his scarf all the way up to his mouth and held eco bags in either of his hands as he hurried down the gloomy Zelkova-lined path alone at a slight jog. His ears hurt so much from the wind that they felt like they were being torn apart.

Speed was his priority for that day's dinner. Even though he was a sucker for side dishes, he shook off the temptation and stuck to buying just fried things, pork, and a radish, planning to make an easy pork and grated radish soup. He had some great cabbage he'd gotten from his landlady, plus minced green onion to use in the stock, and, come to think of it, he'd gotten some citrus yuzu from his landlady, too. He had more than enough condiments, and other than that, the remaining ingredients he needed to stick into the dish were just Japanese sake and konbu seaweed. If he added those together, the moisture that would come out of the cabbage would automatically create a soup.

He should still have frozen rice. He could be done with it in just twenty minutes.

His footsteps rang out over the freezing asphalt. He turned at the familiar corner and arrived at his usual street. Then he stopped to look up at the second story window of the condo next door.

During that week, he'd developed a bad habit of stopping at that spot.

The window he looked up at was still curtained. The living room was dark, and there were no signs of anyone moving in it.

So she still hasn't come back. Ryuuji unconsciously furrowed his brows. What in the world could the owner of that place be doing, and where was she doing it, and why hadn't she come back?

The whisper he'd heard on the class trip revived in his mind. *I just like Ryuuji.* Ryuuji had heard it. He had heard Taiga's last words. *Is there a clue in them? Did*

she leave some kind of hint about why she hasn't come back?

Had she really gotten sick like the homeroom teacher told him? He'd heard she had barely gotten a scratch in the fall, but maybe her injuries had actually been worse than that.

If that wasn't it, was it because she thought that he and Minori would get together, and the thought was too painful for her to bear?

Was it because she'd figured out that Ryuuji found out how she felt, and because she couldn't show her face in front of him?

"You idiot..."

He tried saying it quietly out loud. Taiga probably wouldn't be able to hear it, but that was what he wanted to say to her.

If the reason she hadn't come back wasn't because she was sick, but because of something like that, then Taiga really was an idiot. What use was there in running away like this? Did she plan on never coming back and never seeing him again? Did she think she could get away with that and leave him behind to pretend none of it ever happened? Did she think she could just close her eyes and plug her ears so she would never know what happened between him and Minori?

What if—Ryuuji thought, but then shook his head.

No matter how long he looked up at the extravagant condo in thought, he would never find an answer. If he didn't ask Taiga herself, he'd never know what the truth was.

His whole body shook from the chill of the northerly winds that he couldn't even open his eyes. Ryuuji took a deep breath. Anyway, he had to get dinner ready. He side-eyed the condo entrance as he tried walking past it.

"Gweh!"

That was when it happened.

Everything in front of his eyes went dark. His throat closed up, and he couldn't breathe. In that moment, as he fell over, Ryuuji understood the true nature of a random attack.

BAM! He dropped his bag. “Ta...”

Taiga—was going to kill him.

“Oh, yikes...”

At the corner of his vision, he saw the small hand that had been holding on to his scarf suddenly let it go. After being so cowardly strangled from behind, his throat was assailed by the cold outside air.

“Guh-hck! Ugh...*cough cough...! Cough!*”

“Stop, you’re being way too dramatic.”

Ryuuji gagged pitifully, still on one knee and half in tears.

“You...you idiot...!”

Without thinking, he shouted the message he’d wanted to tell her earlier.

“You strangle someone and just say, ‘Oh, yikes?!’ I actually lost consciousness for a second, like seriously! What are you trying to do to me?! Who comes up to someone like that?!”

The more he talked, the more impassioned he became, but Taiga just pouted. Her expression seemed to boastfully say *Oh, how could you? It’s not like this is my fault*. He pointed a finger right at her face.

“Oh, how could you? It’s not like this is my fault.”

She said it out loud! She actually said it!

Ryuuji’s eyes glinted crazily as Taiga proudly puffed out her chest. Her expression, coupled with the way she thrust her chin high into the air, made it seem as though insolence itself were wearing clothes and walking around.

“I saw you around that corner. I thought about calling out to you, but yelling in public is kind of embarrassing, right? I tried waving my hand at you a little, but you didn’t notice me at all. Is there something wrong with your eyes? Have you got an oil slick on them or something? Are you actually washing your face?”

“Whatdidyousay...?!” Ryuuji growled as though he were reading aloud a curse, still guarding his precious throat with both his hands. “Don’t mess with me! You know what, you—you—what were you... What were you doing—”

That was all he could manage to say. Ryuuji's lips froze right then. His voice stuck in his throat. The finger he held pointed at the tip of Taiga's nose quivered, and he couldn't bring himself to say the next words.

"...Taiga, it's you!"

He finally got his voice to work again. Then, he simply bent over backwards. He opened his eyes wide, raised both his hands, and just sat right down on the street.

"Huh? You're being weird. What's wrong with you?"

Ryuuji's spine quivered. Taiga really had come back.

She was standing right there before his very eyes.

"You can keep blabbering in the afterlife," Taiga growled. Her lips twisted up, and she gave him a look that said, *I'm gonna be the one to send you there*. With ferocity befitting the Palmtop Tiger, she grumbled unpleasantly in her throat.

She had her school uniform and her usual duffel coat on. A giant bag crossed her chest, and she had both hands in her pockets. Her nose was red from the cold. Her long hair was tied up and spilling down one side of her shoulder. Instead of wrapping her scarf around her neck, she had just left it loose like she was some thug from the mafia.



He spotted a white bandage on her forehead.

“Ta...Taiga...”

She came back. She came back home. Ryuuji’s lips quivered. *Tch*, Taiga clicked her tongue.

“Why are you being all weird now?” Seemingly annoyed, she twisted away and glared down at Ryuuji from a 45-degree angle as he sat on the street.

“You-you-yo...”

“Like I said, what?!”

“Wh...where did you go...?! Why didn’t you come home right away?!”

“Hrk!”

Ryuuji grabbed at the easiest part of Taiga that he could reach. He wasn’t trying to get back at her for what she had done earlier, but this just happened to be both ends of her scarf. As a result, he was now strangling Taiga as he shook her as though he were interrogating her.

“Do you know just how worried I was about you?! What the heck! Were you! Doing! Up until now?! And who were you with?!”

“Guh...that hurts, you idiot!”

Voom! Taiga’s right hand tore through the air as though trying to break the sound barrier. She hit Ryuuji’s chin. *That hurt, but—but—but—but—*

No matter what I do...

“What’s wrong with you?! You pig-dog, demon-faced devil-grimace! You skeleton!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! WHOA!”

Slap, slap, slap! SLAP! Ryuuji managed to avoid two of the blows, which was a spectacular feat, but only made Taiga angrier.

“Don’t you dare avoid that!” she said stubbornly.

She latched on to his collar. She grabbed his hair, his ears, and his face in both hands, and then, as if she were going to yell her insults and complaints right at his nose, she took a big breath. In that moment...

...Ryuuji saw the sidewalk lights reflected in her eyes.

When she blinked, it was like stars fell from her eyes, glittering with a mysteriously deep color. He felt her skin from up close, thick with her body heat. He felt the strange warmth of the hands that touched his face and the breath that almost grazed his lips.

“Uh!” He desperately pried himself away from her.

“Wha—?”

Shaken by the strangeness of it all, he’d pulled away too aggressively. To escape Taiga’s hot hands, he had writhed with desperation that couldn’t be misconstrued as a joke.

The two of them wordlessly faced each other. The silence sank into the chilly asphalt.

Taiga seemed taken aback by Ryuuji’s too-sudden resistance. Her mouth was slightly ajar. She tilted her head as if to say *But this is supposed to be normal for us*.

Ryuuji couldn’t say anything. The ears and cheeks she had grabbed still felt hot, like they were burning. He didn’t know what kind of expression he had on his face, but as Taiga looked him, she seemed to realize something.

“What’s with you...”

As she took a trembling breath, a faint rosy color rose in her cheeks.

It’s about Ryuuji—

“What is with you?!” Taiga’s wide-open eyes glittered with the desperation of a wounded animal.

“Whoa?!”

“What! What! What! What! What! What is it?!” She flailed both her arms and started to assail Ryuuji once more. There was a recklessness and desperation about her, as though she were trying to destroy all that her hands could reach. Taiga thrashed her arms and legs like a child as she drove Ryuuji to the wall.

“What do you want to say to me...?!”

“Uh...”

Bam! She hit him in the chest. Then, picking up where she left off, she latched back onto his collar, almost like she believed she could overwrite the strange atmosphere floating around them by redoing everything. But she couldn’t reverse the rosy redness that dyed her face up to her ears. Her breath was stifled, and she was biting her lip, but Taiga continued to glare at Ryuuji.

Was it his throat or the hand she was holding him with that was hot? Was it his chest or Taiga’s heart that was ringing out—

Because I like Ryuuji.

In that moment, Taiga held his throat and shoulders fast as she brought her face close to his. Ryuuji couldn’t even make a sound as his feet failed him and floated in the air.

He didn’t know what happened, but it was like his brain crashed. Everything suddenly went white.

The impact was several times worse than when she strangled him. Heaven and earth flipped, and the stars burned out. Everything in the whole world burned to nothing in that heat. He couldn’t see anything, couldn’t hear.

He saw a glimpse of Taiga’s sullen face as he looked up at the sky that had fallen and realized he was upside down. Now lying faceup on the street, Ryuuji mused over his present situation like an idiot.

“Ahh...wait, you flipped me over...?!”

Taiga had flipped him, breezily reversing the sky and ground. Because she was holding his neck, he had been saved from having his head hit the ground, but,

well, actually she hadn't saved him at all.

"Wh-what do you think you're doing?! What do you think you are?! A random attacker?! A mugger?! What's so great about attacking me?!"

"Sorry. But you were looking at me weird all of a sudden. As a maiden in distress, my instincts kicked in."

"I was just surprised because you came back out of nowhere! Actually, you're the one who attacked me first! I'm the one who was in way more danger!"

"You tried to strangle me though."

"You tried to strangle me even before that!"

Ryuuji got back on his feet, flailing both arms like a conductor as he encroached on Taiga's space. Taiga turned away sulkily, which just annoyed him more.

"I was thinking this whole entire time—This. Whole. Entiiiiiire. Time. About what could have happened to you and why you wouldn't come home. I was worried about you for sooooo long! You didn't even tell me anything, and then just when I think you've suddenly come home, you try to strangle me! You hit me! And to top it all off, you flipped me over! What's going on here?! Explain! Where have you been up until now?! Was the reason you didn't come home because you like AHHHHHH!"

"Whaaat...?"

Taiga fell silent as Ryuuji cut himself off with that sudden yell. As she slowly and uncomfortably took a step away from him, thick sweat began running down Ryuuji's forehead, his armpits, and his back. *It's not like I can say that out loud.*

It's not like I can say that.

"You like me, don't you? You thought I was Kitamura and confessed to me. Do you remember? Could it be, maybe, that the reason why you didn't come home was because you realized that?"

He couldn't. He absolutely could not say that.

Ryuuji swallowed the forbidden words and held his breath. His head went numb, and his body went numb, and for some unknown reason, only his heart

continued to squirm in the middle of his chest as though it were an independent living being.

Taiga's forehead furrowed. She watched Ryuuji surreptitiously—all while keeping a good two meters between them.

But...this girl liked him.

"I-I-I-I-I-I, I-I, I-I-I-I...I-I-I..."

Had she finally come home because she had prepared herself? Had she come back to face him? To hear his answer?

"I-I-I got a radish...!"

Bsht!

Ryuuji thrust the radish that had fallen out of his eco bag at Taiga's nose. Still silent, Taiga looked at it.

"Are you really okay?"

"I'm fine! I got pork...! I got fried tofu...!"

As Ryuuji rattled off the names of the things he had bought, Taiga thrust a freezing cold convenience store bag against his cheek. "This is frozen fried rice," she said.

"Eeeeeek!" Ryuuji reflexively jumped at the sudden coldness. "Th-that was cold! What're you doing?!"

"Are you back to your senses now?"

He gaped. He opened and closed his mouth, grasping for a retort. *Who do you think made me this mess in the first place, or Would you rather I tell you something serious out of the blue, or—*

"This'll take ten days to heal. It's almost better now."

But before he could answer, Taiga pushed up her bangs and pointed to the white bandage on her temple. When he saw her do that, Ryuuji's complaints all disappeared. The sweat that had soaked his skin suddenly cooled in the midwinter northerly wind.

"Did...did they give you stitches?"

Maybe...he had gotten to a point where he couldn't distinguish between his imagination and reality. That might be why seeing Taiga's injury with his own eyes was such a shock. Ryuuji couldn't move as he looked at the white bandage. Even words seemed to escape him.

Taiga snorted. "I wouldn't need stitches for something like this. They said they could just bash a huge staple in it to keep it together and make it heal faster, but I said I definitely didn't need that. It sounded scary. I've still got a cut, but it doesn't hurt. I can wash my head like normal now. It's just super itchy."

"Hey, don't scratch it!" Ryuuji grabbed her fingers in a fluster as she tried to fiddle with her cut. As though her healing wound suddenly ached now that she'd remembered it was there, Taiga brushed Ryuuji's hand away roughly.

"Well... Sorry. I know I made you worry. I didn't get hurt that bad, as you can see. Also, I lied about being sick. I'm completely fine. I was just skipping school."

"I see, so you're completely fine. Then...what? Huh? Huuh?!"

As she watched Ryuuji's eyes go so wide they could have split, Taiga shrugged as though she didn't care.

"I did it because I haven't seen my mom in a while. I didn't think she'd actually come, so I was pretty emotional. We stayed at a hotel and spent time with each other. We went shopping and ate together, and went to the movies, and talked. She spoiled me as much as I wanted."

"You're close...with your mom...? And that's why you didn't come home...?"

"That's right. My relationship with my mom is going great, despite the circumstances. We were separated for a few years because she lives pretty far away. See, she's not like that crummy old man. He's got that whole irritating 'He's a father but doesn't do anything!' thing, but she's not like that, so I think I can behave for her."

Taiga nodded to herself. The commentary, though persuasive, felt rehearsed somewhat.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh...like I'm falling for that...!" Ryuuji held his head and let the confusion from the past week all out with a sigh. "Do you know how worried I was...?! Why would you turn off your cell phone?! If that's what was going on,

then you could have told me! You could have messaged me or something!”

“My phone battery died.”

“You could have charged it at a convenience store or shop or somewhere!”

“Oh, could I? Huh, I didn’t know.”

I see, I see, so it was the battery... You were taking your sweet time hanging out with your mom... I guess I was the only one stuck in that blizzard for the whole week.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I really am. You, Kitamura-kun, and Minorin looked for me, right?”

“You don’t remember, though, right...because you were unconscious.”

“Koigakubo Yuri told me at the hospital. She said you were all reckless, and she was kind of mad, but it made me happy to hear about about it. I promise that next time, if you get stuck in the snow, I’ll go out to find you.”

After saying something incredibly serious, her nostrils flared as though she were slightly embarrassed. But even as she did that, she nodded. As he watched her, Ryuuji thought, *I knew it.*

Taiga didn’t remember anything. He was confident of that. That meant the reason she had come back was because her vacation with her mom was over, and it *wasn’t* because she had readied herself to hear his answer after confessing.

In that case—if he pretended he hadn’t heard her, everything would go back to the way it was. Even if he couldn’t change what had happened, he could at least pretend he’d forgotten about it. He could pretend, just like Minori had pretended Ryuuji’s feelings didn’t exist. It had hurt him when she did that, but it probably wouldn’t hurt Taiga, because he would be in sync with Taiga’s feelings about the matter, which were that she wouldn’t tell him how she felt.

“So, you really don’t remember anything...?”

Yeah, Taiga nodded. “But—” She turned her long eyelashes down and muttered in a low voice as though she were talking to herself. “I feel like I had this dream. Kitamura-kun carried me on his back, and it was like I was half-

asleep and just letting everything out and saying stuff like an idiot. That was...a dream, right?"

Ryuuji didn't hesitate. "It was a dream," he responded.

In that moment, a sudden, freezing cold gust swept over them. "It's cold!" Taiga groaned and held down her hair, which had been swept up by the wind. She quickly pulled her coat closed. She rounded her already narrow shoulders so they were even smaller and knit her eyebrows together.

"Kitamura really did carry you on his back up the cliff, but you didn't say anything. You were unconscious the whole time—that's what I heard."

"Really? Good. For a second, I was like, 'Huh?! Maybe that really did happen?!' and I got super nervous."

"You really are—"

Ryuuji swallowed a hard lump in his throat and licked his lips. Taiga had accepted a lie like that. She could be strangely sharp about things sometimes, but in that moment, it seemed she wasn't showing any keenness at all.

"You really are a klutz."

What? Taiga pouted for a second. "Tch, That's kind of frustrating. I guess I can't argue that. That's right, I am a klutz. After what happened, I really, really do get that. But...I'm sincere in my own klutzy way."

As though she had prepared herself for something, she looked at Ryuuji's face and said, "I was thinking about it this whole time...did you get to ask Minorin how she really feels? You didn't lose your chance to talk to her because I caused that mess, right?"

If his eyes could see the wounds in someone's heart, Ryuuji thought, then his vision would probably be dyed red right now.

"You don't have to worry about me and Kushieda anymore."

"Why? Oh, is it because you don't want me sticking my nose into it since I'm such a troublemaker? In that case, I'll—"

"No, it's not that. That's what you think? That's not it. It doesn't have anything to do with what happened to you. I just don't have a reason to get an

answer from her anymore. That's the truth."

Taiga seemed to be at a loss for words. She closed her mouth. Her eyes, which had overflowed with tears when she found out that Minori had rejected Ryuuji, opened wide.

But no matter how intensely she looked at him, the words he couldn't say and the feelings he couldn't question wouldn't change. *Why did you want Kushieda and me to get together?*

"I don't get what you're thinking. But I just want you to know...that if you need my help, you just need to tell me. Definitely tell me. In my own klutzy, sincere way, I'll help you."

She probably meant it, too. That was the kind of person Taiga was. If she knew that the person she liked was in love with someone else, she'd try to help that person. Ryuuji knew that. He'd seen what she did when she knew that Kitamura had been tormented by his unrequited love for Kanou Sumire.

"I can't figure out what you're thinking either..."

Why did she have feelings for him now? What had happened to her feelings for Kitamura?

Part of him wanted to know, but the other wondered what he would even do if he found out. Would he try to support Taiga's feelings for Kitamura once again? Would he try to persuade her to remember that she had been in love with Kitamura before? Would he tell her that she no longer had a rival and that all she had to do was try a little harder? Was that really what he was thinking of doing?

"I'm cold! That's what I'm thinking. I'm thinking that standing around here talking was a stupid decision. Let's go home. We'll catch colds." As though trying to cut the conversation with no foreseeable end short, Taiga flipped around. She immediately started walking to the condo entrance.

"Wait..."

"No. It's cold."

"Are you just eating frozen fried rice for dinner? Why don't you eat at my

place? It'll make Yasuko happy. She's been worried about you this whole time, too," Ryuuji called out to her in spite of himself, but Taiga turned around slightly and shook her head.

"It's fine. I like fried rice. Tell Ya-chan I say 'hi' and that Taiga's doing completely fine."

"Don't be stubborn."

"I'm not. I feel like I've had the stubbornness crushed out of me..."

As she went up the steps of the entrance, Taiga turned back around one more time. She had a slight smile on her face, as though she had told a joke. Maybe it was because of the cold, but her pale face was splotched with red right at the tip of her nose.

"I'm really going home now. I'm tired, so I'm going to eat this quick and then sleep. I'm going to go to school tomorrow, so things will be fine."

A cold gust flipped Taiga's skirt, and the hood of her coat rustled. The auto-lock on the door echoed loudly as it closed.

Chapter 2

After the nuclear war, civilization was destroyed, and with the proliferation of virus-based biological weapons, ninety percent of the world's population was obliterated. The remaining humans created their own colonies and could only wait for extinction. However, having lost their masters, atomic-reactor-equipped robotic weapons from the old civilization continued the "war." They became enemies of those who survived and attacked the colonies.

One day, a boy living in a colony was chased into the historic "ruins" while escaping the robots. In the back of those ruins, he found and woke a slumbering battle android. No one knew that encounter would change humankind's fate! That's the story so far!

"Why are all the survivors men? They're missing the better part of humanity."

"It's because most of the ones who survived the virus were really strong guys."

"It's not like guys would date each other just because of that."

"That battle android isn't a guy. It's sexless. Plus, the guys aren't actually dating each other yet, they're just getting really close."

"You seem like you're following the story pretty intently..."

"It's because they had me read the script before the broadcast." Kitamura Yuusaku proudly pushed up his glasses and pulled the top off his bento box. There was seaweed stuck to the bottom of the lid. "Oh, oops." He diligently reshaped his seaweed until his lunch was back in order.

Sitting diagonally across from Kitamura, Ryuuji also spread out his lunch. Though he'd made it himself, he didn't feel happy in the slightest as he was reunited with his familiar but uninspired side dishes.

Disquieting words that were far too heavy for lunchtime, like "kill it," "die," "the apocalypse," and "nuclear fusion" washed over the classroom. Once the third semester had started, someone had objected to the student council

monopolizing the school broadcasts, and so the student council's five-day-a-week "Supporters of Your Love" program now had to split time with the drama club's radio play. Though the play's cast seemed to consist of girls talking in rough voices, in actuality, that wasn't the intent. The drama club consisted entirely of girls, but all the roles in the screenplay were male.

One of the girls grumbled, "Kill it!" in a low voice...for the hundredth time. Feeling a little fed up with it all, Ryuuji poked at his chicken stew with his chopsticks.

"Aren't they going a little heavy on the brutality? Shouldn't it be like, something that's more appropriate for lunch? Don't they have something more pleasant like a funny story that's better for a girl's voice?"

"The story might be kind of too complex to do in short broadcasts. Anyway, they wrote this for the girls."

"I don't think they're listening—or anyone else for that matter."

Ryuuji and Kitamura's eyes nonchalantly went around the classroom. It seemed there wasn't a single person lending an ear to the earnest performance flowing from the speakers. Ryuuji and Kitamura were probably listening to it most seriously. Incidentally, Noto and Haruta had gone to the school store and were in the middle of a bloody battle to buy bread, so they probably wouldn't be coming back for a while.

Kitamura's handsome face had a slight wickedness to it as he murmured in a low voice, "I knew it. We should have just had me on the radio forever. Well, we did feel like we were running out of material."

"Actually, your show wasn't that popular either... Well, I can't actually tell you that."

But you just told me that! Oh, you heard me? The two oafs kept up their easygoing exchange.

"No no no no no no no! You don't neeeeeeed to!"

A high-pitched girl's voice interrupted them from by the window. It was Kihara Maya who had raised her voice. Kashii Nanako clung to Maya's arm, her face frozen. Unusually, Ami wasn't with them. Instead, the two of them were

faced by Taiga, who stood there imposingly.

“Why are you so adamant? You’re not the one who asked about it.”

“All I asked was whether you were feeling better! No one asked for a show and tell about your gash!”

“But seeing it is the best way to show you. A puncture wound is worth a thousand words.”

She was probably trying to say *A picture is worth a thousand words. She really is Minori’s friend...*

“No matter what happens, Aisaka really is Kushieda’s friend, isn’t she?”

It seemed a similar thought occurred to Kitamura. Incidentally, Minori wasn’t anywhere in the classroom.

I-It’s...i-it’s, no! You don’t need to! Ahh! Maya wailed and pushed Taiga away. Even Nanako seemed repelled by the idea.

“I’m bad with these kinds of things. Plus, it’s lunch, so please just stop! Right, I’ll give you a meatball! Okay?”

She thrust out a plastic fork with the meatball offering. Taiga opened her mouth wide and accepted it. Nanako and Maya looked at each other and sighed in relief.

“But this doesn’t change anything! Now, feast on this with your very own eyes!”

Ahhh! The two beauties were cornered by Taiga, who pulled the bandage on her forehead off to show them her still healing wound. Ryuuji tilted his head. This was elementary school-level bullying.

“Stop, Tiger!”

“No, go for it, Tiger!”

A group of boys with their lunches spread out nearby were jeering. When Taiga turned around and bared her teeth at them, though, they ran away at full speed.

“Seriously,” said Ryuuji, “what does she think she’s doing...”

“Well, at least she seems healthy.” To Ryuuji’s exasperation, Kitamura just kept eating. He practically looked like he was in a commercial for seaweed lunch boxes. “What a relief. She’s healthy and smiling again because of how brave you were, Takasu.”

“...”

Ryuuji stared at his friend. Kitamura noticed his gaze.

“Well, of course I get it. If she asks me what happened, I’ll tell her I saved her. That’s what you want, right?”

“...”

“Hey, what’s going on? Why’re you looking at me like that?”

He was thinking that the reason Kitamura hadn’t asked about anything must be because he already knew. He couldn’t actually say it out loud, so he just thought it.

Immediately after the incident, out of nowhere and without any explanation, Ryuuji had asked Kitamura to “say that you saved Taiga,” but Kitamura hadn’t tried to ask why. He just said, *It’s not your fault*, and did as he was told.

Kitamura knew Ryuuji had liked Minori, but that Ryuuji’s heart was broken on Christmas Eve and that Taiga was acting strangely on New Year’s. At some point in spring, Taiga had confessed to him, and then he had gotten help settling his own unrequited love. At that point, Kitamura had had a weirdly healthy relationship with Taiga, neither of them attempting to cross the lines of friendship.

In other words, Kitamura must have known for a while that Taiga liked Takasu Ryuuji. That was what Ryuuji thought.

“Stop it! I won’t give anything up, no matter how passionately you look at me!”

Of course, the only ones in the whole world who could have known what happened in the minutes that Ryuuji spent pulling Taiga up from the cliff were Taiga and Ryuuji—or rather, maybe just Ryuuji.

“You kind of have double lids...like they look super crisp...”

“What’re you talking about? I swear I haven’t gotten any surgery.”

Even more terrifying—maybe it wasn’t just Kitamura who knew. There was a possibility Ryuuji was the only dim-witted idiot without a clue. Ami might have known, too. *I hate you because you’re an idiot*—the knife-like words she’d stabbed him with could have been about him making Taiga help him with his own unrequited love while he was unaware of Taiga’s own feelings. Ami might have been pointing out his own foolishness.

And then there was Minori. The reason why she was so firm about not accepting his feelings might have been because of Taiga, too.

At any rate, the only thing he knew for sure was just that he was most definitely an idiot. If Taiga hadn’t been so clumsy, he might be oblivious even now. He might have just accepted everything Taiga had done for him, thinking, *It’s because she’s actually a really nice person!*

But if he was going to go through with pretending nothing had happened, that wasn’t much different, either.

“Stop that, Aisaka! You’ll get it infected!” Kitamura finally spoke up as the class rep. It seemed he had finally gotten riled up once the girls started screaming.

Taiga glanced over their way while chasing Maya and Nanako around. With a gutsy smile, she took big strides toward them. “Look! It’s already all healed up!”

“Whoa...!”

“Ahh!”

She stripped the bandage right off.

Ryuuji saw Taiga’s wound close up. The cut was just a few centimeters long and nestled in the middle of a yellowing, healing bruise that had a five-centimeter radius. Though the wound had closed up, it was still covered with raw-looking hardened blood.

“Why’re you showing us that while we’re eating?!” Of course, any normal person would be surprised seeing *that*. Ryuuji automatically felt the urge to bonk her head.

“Oh...but, you’re right. It’s mostly healed over!” Though Kitamura had also been taken aback like Ryuuji, he put up his thumb, a giant smile coming over his face.

“Right!” Taiga happily cocked her head to the side and returned the thumbs up.

Why?

Why was it that she would strangle him, hit him, and trip him, but give Kitamura a smile and a thumbs up? If she liked him, why didn’t she act... No, no, no. Why did he want her to act any differently when he’d already decided to forget about it?

Maybe things really would have been better off if he were still oblivious. If he didn’t know anything, he wouldn’t have just thought something so lame. He would have smiled dryly, just thinking, *She really does like Kitamura.*

“I got away with just this cut because of you, Kitamura-kun. Thanks for saving me!”

“Oh, no no no...no, no.”

Kitamura waved his hand vigorously in front of his face and veery slowly turned his eyes to look at Ryuuji’s face. Ryuuji pretended not to notice.

Taiga didn’t even notice the odd expressions on the two boy’s faces. “Why are you here, Kitamura-kun?”

“Huh?! Am I not allowed to be here?!”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. Earlier, Minorin ran off saying she needed to go get the athletic field for her club or something. She was saying she wouldn’t lose to the soccer club or whatever. Aren’t you a captain, too, Kitamura-kun?”

Oh, that’s what you meant... Kitamura righted himself and pushed up his askew glasses. “Actually, the girls’ and boys’ softball teams merged the other day, and Kushieda officially became their captain. So, I resigned from my post. I’m still a member, but there were some things I really couldn’t do while being student council president.”

Oh, really? Really. Taiga and Kitamura grinned as they exchanged words.

Ryuuji pretended not to notice as he ate bamboo shoots he'd boiled in a soup base.

"But still, I'm so relieved you're back at school safe and sound, Aisaka. Why did you have to miss a whole week of school though? Everyone was super worried."

"Heh heh heh. A little something came up."

Taiga cast a glance at Ryuuji. What she probably wanted to tell him was that telling everyone else she had been skipping school was useless. Her eyes held their shared secret as the edges of her mouth twisted up. *I know*, Ryuuji replied with his eyes as he drank his half-finished, tepid oolong tea.

I wish I could take all the secrets and stuff I have to hide and gulp them down like my tea, he thought, *so I can just lock them away in my stomach...*

"Takasu, Yuri-chan is asking for you!" A classmate called out to him.

"Yeah!"

Ryuuji didn't close the top to his bento box but gestured at his seat with his chin to Taiga.

"You didn't bring lunch, right? I haven't touched most of it, so you can eat it. I haven't really got an appetite today."

"Huh? But..." Taiga looked down at his lunch, seeming troubled.

Kitamura smiled like an old lady and said, "Just have it."

"I don't have chopsticks... I don't wanna use yours. Give me disposable ones."

"Pretend that disposable chopsticks don't exist in this world. Instead, I want you to know that there are rainforests being destroyed."

"Ugh, shuddup...! After a week without you, it's like your annoyingness is just surrounding me."

"If you don't want to use them as is, then just wash them."

Eco-jerk, Taiga yelled, and he left the classroom without even turning around. As he walked, he thought. *Would other people think it's weird that I gave the lunch I'd been eating to a girl? Guess it is weird... Yeah, it would be weird.*

But, he thought, if things really hadn't changed, he would probably still have done something like that. If he didn't give it to her, she might have even stolen it.

In that case, he ought to do now just like he would have done before. If he was going to insist that nothing had changed, he had to convince himself of that through his own actions.

There was a sprinkling of other students in the teachers' room during lunch break. There were some eagerly holding textbooks in one hand while going through school questions, and several girls had made camp and spread out their lunches around a young, popular male teacher. Up ahead, someone waited for Ryuuji at the edge of the second-year teachers' island.

"Why haven't you turned it in? It's very, very important..."

The bachelorette (age 30), aka Koigakubo Yuri, nursed a lunch of stewed vegetables and soba noodles from delivery. The plastic wrap still on the bowl was clouded white on the inside, and her noodles were probably growing progressively soggy in that instant, Ryuuji imagined.

"Everyone else turned them in like they were supposed to... It's so unlike you to forget something, Takasu-kun..." Koigakubo Yuji's gaze went uneasily to the soba noodles that were growing more waterlogged by the second. As though remembering what she was doing, her gaze went back to Ryuuji's face, but then she took another glance at it.

"Please eat... I'm listening. Your noodles aren't going to be good for much longer."

"Huh! No, no, it's fine. You haven't eaten yet either, right, Takasu-kun? I can't go slurping down these noodles. That wouldn't be right as a teacher."

"I've already finished lunch, so please eat. It's actually making me worry now."

"I-Is it? Sorry. I didn't have much time, and there were a lot of things I needed to finish, so many things."

The single teacher skillfully used a hair clip to put her curled hair in a half-updo, pulled off the plastic, and broke her chopsticks apart as she watched Ryuuji. However, just as she reeled in the noodles with a chuckle, she stopped.

“Um...look, there was that thing that happened during the school trip, right? When Aisaka-san went missing.”

“Yeah...”

She poked at the cloud ear mushroom she had fished from the bottom of the bowl and said, “So I was thinking that maybe you were so worried, Takasu-kun, maybe even too worried about Aisaka-san, and that it might have had an effect on you—that it might have messed with...the cogs in your head.”

The cogs in your head—he’d never thought the day would have come when his homeroom teacher would say that to him. Ryuuji was at a loss for words, and an uneasy silence settled between the two of them. As though evading the awkwardness, Koigakubo Yuri stuck a mushroom into her mouth.

“Because, look, *phoo phoo*, you’ve been pretty out of it lately. Plus, you’ve been forgetting things like now. You’re really worrying me as your teacher, Takasu-kun. Especially when it comes to taking care of yourself mentally. I wonder if that’s what you need? That’s sort of what I’ve been thinking.”

Ryuuji watched her slurp down her noodles. “I’ve had a lot of things going on!”

The soup sprayed out onto the confusion of class materials on her desk, and stains formed on her free real estate magazines. Ryuuji hated free magazines. He didn’t think they were useful. *Those things are basically just advertisements polluting the world, and they waste resources! If you’re just like, Whoa, it’s free, and collect a bunch of things that you don’t even need, of course you’re not going to be able to clean your place anymore! Just throw that stuff away! Actually, just don’t even take it to begin with!*

Ryuuji held down the hand that urged him to dump the magazines into the trash. *Don’t rampage, my eco spirit!*

“Yeah, I have a lot to deal with, but isn’t that normal? Plus, the reason why I didn’t turn in my future aspirations survey wasn’t because the cogs in my head

were messed up. It's because my mom and I have different opinions, so I'm still in the middle of working on it!"

"Oh, really...?"

"Yes. Real-ly!"

Unusually for him, Ryuuji pouted defiantly and looked down at the homeroom teacher who had been slurping the soba noodles with eyes like a hawk in the middle of a killing dive. *This damn spinster (age 30)! All you do is eat delivery! That's way too much sodium for your diet! You try to buy expensive, super weird real estate!* ...wasn't what he was thinking, though it also wasn't necessarily far off.

The day before, he really had talked to Yasuko about his future while eating pork daikon soup. He'd even told her, *I need to write and turn in what my future aspirations are because that's what they're using to split up the classes next year.*

Yasuko's answer was, "'Imma study my hardest!' That's all you need to write. ☆" And that was all she'd had time for before she had to hurry off to work. Of course, she was fast asleep when he left for school, and the thick smell of alcohol filling the room was practically enough to get him drunk, too, so he couldn't talk to her then, either.

Ryuuji wanted to have a proper talk with Yasuko about the printout before turning it in because of his Oedipal com...or rather, because he was serious. This was about his future, and he wanted to take it seriously. There was no way he'd let someone blame that on the cogs in his mind!

"I see, I see."

Koigakubo Yuri popped a fish cake in her mouth and waved around her chopsticks.

"Well, Takasu-kun, you're a really good student, so there isn't much for me to worry about, anyway. I have high expectations for you, which is why I'm being so nosy. That's just how teachers are."

"Expectations?"

She raised her eyebrows slightly, and Ryuuji realized that the homeroom teacher's eyes were moving as though searching for something in his expression.

"Please don't. My family's poor."

He felt like she was going to say something, so he got to his feet before she could, but she just silently placed her chopsticks on the rim of her bowl. She turned a smile to him.

"Anyway, please bring it in as soon as possible, okay? The only ones in the class who haven't are you and Aisaka-san, Takasu-kun."

"Taiga, too? Then why did you only call me in..."

"That's because I only just gave Aisaka-san the printout. You have a lot of things going on, too, but keep that apart from this. Be sure to make time to talk to your mom and to think about it."

Ryuuji excused himself from the staff room. His footsteps towards the classroom were heavy, and his feet felt like they could stop at any moment.

His homeroom teacher said to keep things separate, but it wasn't that easy. He couldn't easily imagine the ever-changing future when he was trying to pretend nothing had changed. On top of that, he fundamentally didn't see eye to eye with Yasuko. Yasuko wasn't seriously thinking about the state of the Takasu household's finances—she just had her head in the clouds. Trying to persuade her of that would be an ordeal in itself. He felt like he was going to faint.

"Haah..."

He gently supported his head with his right hand as it swayed to the side.

He was probably feeling faint because he hadn't gotten much sleep the past few days. His feet, which should have been heading back to the classroom, instead guided him toward the deserted breezeway. He needed to rest a little more before he could face Kitamura and Taiga, who were probably eating their lunches together. He would most likely add to his pile of lies if he were around

them.

But when he reached the middle of the breezeway that continued on to the gym, Ryuuji felt like he couldn't breathe. He opened the window and breathed in a lungful of air so cold it made his lungs sting, and flapped his mouth open and closed like a koi fish.

No matter how much he breathed in, he was in agony. Even when he stuck his head out the window, he still felt caged. Everyone else was moving forward, and he was perfectly aware he was the only one at a standstill. That applied to his future, too. He felt like he was being left in the dust in a lot of ways.

None of this was okay. He knew that. It was like he was just haphazardly patching problems as they came apart at the seams. He wasn't actively fixing a single thing. He wanted to do things the right way, but he didn't know how.

Maybe the cogs in his head really were out of place. He was the son of Takasu Yasuko-chan, after all. His screws and springs and who knows what other things might have been falling out without him even noticing.

"Maybe...maybe I really am a failure of a person?"

The lone, ill-favored boy talked to himself as he crouched by the window frame. He noticed the dust and small dry leaves jammed into the window gutter and realized that if he kept his face pushed up against it, he might break out in hives. Ryuuji pulled a tissue out of his pocket and wrapped it around his index finger without skipping a beat. Then he scrubbed at the gutter like someone's mother-in-law.

What a depressing person I am... He was at least self-aware of that much.

A person who was the exact opposite of himself came to his mind. That was Kushieda Minori.

He'd thought she was a bright person ever since he met her. She smiled at him without batting an eye, even though he had a face that made him look like some fishy delinquent. He kept his head down to hide his sinister face from people's eyes, but Minori was always open and honest, looking up at the sun. That was why he had loved her.

In that moment, he realized once again just how tough Minori was. She

wasn't just bright, kind, and cute, but also had the will to firmly continue down her own path. Sometimes she hurt those around her (*like me!*), but she never turned back and also never stopped. What he had thought was an admirable sunflower, turning up its lively petals to bask in the light of the sun...was actually more like an iron missile aiming to blow the sun out of existence.

The reason he'd decided to end his unrequited love for Minori was because he had witnessed her up close and decided he couldn't follow along with her. He didn't mean that in a bad way, though. He just didn't think he could keep up with the speed at which she went through life. However, even after snuffing out the flame of his love, he still wished he could have been more like her.

"Kushieda, you..."

In the end, what he adored was an idea. In his mind, his desire to live like she did hadn't changed.

"You probably see me as nothing but some big tit..."

"Of course I don't."

"Whaaa?!"

Ryuuji was so surprised, his body couldn't keep up with how quickly he spun around. His indoor slippers squeaked stupidly against the ground as he fell right onto his butt.

"Wh-when did you start listening?!"

"'Kushieda, you probably see yourself as Seabiscuit and me as the War Admiral...' is the part I walked in on." She looked serious, her forehead wrinkled and her unyielding eyes gleaming jet-black. "Like I said, I don't think that. We're not horses."

"What's wrong with your ears...?!"

Ryuuji couldn't exactly call what his heart was doing right now "fluttering," but it was helplessly astir that day. Why had Minori appeared now? On top of that, she wasn't making any sense.

"So you're saying you want the mustang special, huh?! Naahh!"

"Get yourself together! You're dangerous! Calm down!"

Minori pranced in front of him. Ryuuji spread his arms automatically. He had jumped out in front of her very accurate depiction of a rampaging horse, but if she were running around the school like that, she was sure to cause an accident.

“What? Why are you stopping me? I was just trying to go back to the classroom like normal.”

“What kind of person runs around inside a building like that?! That’s definitely not normal!”

“You finally said it,” Minori sang in a high-pitched voice. She switched direction, swung her arms around, and started dancing the robot. Ryuuji was at a loss for words. He had forgotten it recently, but this was the kind of person Minori was...

“Whaaat’s going oooon, Takasu-kun? Don’t stand around drooling ectoplasm. You gotta go back to the classroom, too. What were you doing hanging around this remote region in the first place?”

“What are *you* doing around here? You’re not stalking me, are you?”

He’d put everything he had into following Minori’s devoted jests with a joke of his own, but, in that moment, Minori suddenly came back to her senses.

“What’re you saying?”

She seemed exasperated as she looked back at Ryuuji.

“I was at the gym teacher’s office to give back the meeting room key. I was just coming back. The mystery is the reason why you’re here, Takasu-kun.”

“I—”

I’m here because I can never become like you.

It’s because I can’t plow forward through the days like you. I’m trapped by all kinds of things, and I’m going to be stuck here forever—he really couldn’t say that.

“I just had Koigakubo tell me that the cogs in my head are messed up, so I was here dealing with the shock from her saying that to me.”

“What? Your cogs? Wh-what did she mean?”

“It’s because I didn’t submit the future aspirations printout. Plus, there’s yesterday’s...outburst from when I was half-asleep. Apparently, I’ve got her really worried.”

“Oh, right, the dream and the yelling.”

Minori didn’t seem to be making fun of Ryuuji at all. She came to the window, and her breath turned white as it mingled with the cold outside air. She turned to Ryuuji.

“Isn’t it great that Taiga came back home safe? So, so, so, so great.”

Her mouth turned up slightly in a smile.

“So, about that time. If you two hadn’t come with me, Takasu-kun... If I had gone to look for Taiga on my own, I wonder where we would be now. Taiga might not have been the only one in trouble. I’ve been imagining all kinds of ‘what ifs’ and I feel like I might dream-cry sometimes, too.”

“You, too...?”

Of course. Minori, in her Minori-like way, nodded ambiguously.

It was so cold. Ryuuji kept some distance from Minori as he placed his elbows against the window. They were in the same pose. Their shoulders rounded up, and they shivered.

The light, frozen clouds dotted the sky like sorbet, and the weather was clear, though the northern wind seemed to be lethal that day as well. Not a single building obstructed their view beyond the window, and they could see far down into the streets of the town. The inconspicuous color of the residential buildings, the roofs of the detached homes, and the apartments continued on until they were interrupted by the river, before continuing even further on to the garbage facility’s two chimneys. Smoke billowed from the gigantic, red and white-striped cylinders that turned to the skies. Was that really healthy for the environment?

“I thought I could save her by myself.”

Ryuuji saw Minori’s words come from her lips and mix with her white breath

next to him.

“But actually, she’d fallen down that cliff. I really couldn’t have saved her on my own. I’m glad that I didn’t misjudge that back then... I never would have been able to find Taiga on my own. You did a really great job figuring out where she fell, Takasu-kun.”

“About that—”

Something glittering had led him to Taiga.

“—That was because I saw the hairpin dropped in the snow.”

Minori stretched her neck to peer out the window. Their eyes met, and Ryuuji turned away in spite of himself, but Minori wouldn’t look away from him.

“That hairpin wasn’t a present from Taiga to me, was it? You were trying to give it to me, but couldn’t, and then Taiga gave it to me, right? Isn’t that right? If I were to guess...it was when we met at Christmas Eve, and maybe you were trying to give it to me as a present?”

“Uh.”

As though she had already predicted Ryuuji would be speechless, Minori nodded. He’d actually neglected to take the hairpin with him during their meeting on Christmas Eve, so her guess was technically wrong, but he of course couldn’t tell her that. Ryuuji could only look back at Minori’s face.

Of course she wouldn’t know everything. He felt that deeply as he spoke.

“How did you...”

“I reasoned it out. Actually, sorry. I really didn’t know at first. I really thought that it was a present from Taiga.”

Ryuuji couldn’t understand what she was sorry about. “Are...are you trying to apologize for wearing that hairpin or something?”

“I am.”

I have amnesia. I don’t remember what happened on Christmas Eve. So, Takasu-kun, just follow along with me and act as though nothing’s changed... That had been her attitude until now. Now, for the first time, Minori was talking

about the night of Christmas Eve. The night she hadn't acknowledged Ryuuji's feelings.

"I wanted to apologize. I'd decided I wouldn't accept it and ended up hurting you, but then I still wore it in front of you, Takasu-kun. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

"You don't have to..." She'd finally acknowledged that she hadn't forgotten what happened. "Are you suddenly apologizing now because...Taiga came back to school?"

Minori didn't answer Ryuuji. Her eyes just glittered under the sky in the middle of winter. The wind blew at her hair.

Minori might have been the same, Ryuuji suddenly thought. Even Minori, who looked like she was plowing her way forward, might have felt like she was at a standstill like him. Maybe she had ever since that Christmas Eve.

Then, because Taiga returned safe and sound, she had decided to settle things.

"Where is that hairpin now?"

When Minori asked him that question naturally, Ryuuji tried to answer her naturally, too. "It's in my room. You want to use it?"

"No. I won't. I won't take it."

I thought you would say that.

He wanted to smile and say that to her. *You decided to make things right, Minori, and that's made things right for me,* he wanted to tell her.

"I'm..."

But his breathing was off.

"...jealous of you."

He still couldn't take that great leap. He wanted to move forward like Minori, but he still couldn't. He couldn't walk that easily. He couldn't crawl out of that blizzard.

As long as he couldn't forget that voice, Ryuuji couldn't move forward.

"What's wrong? What's with the outburst?"



“I feel like I’m trapped...like I’ve been left behind. There’s something I want to forget, but I can’t. So...”

The blizzard still raged on in his mind. The madly swirling ice fragments were under his weakly closed eyelids, as well as the tears that spilled from under his eyelashes.

“I can’t stand how much it hurts.”

The voice echoed in his ears.

Amid endless loneliness, Taiga had decided she would live alone and silence her feelings forever. That might have been the one time she let her true feelings slip though.

“The thing I want to forget that I can’t is—”

Boof. Minori’s fist made slightly rough contact with the side of Ryuuji’s downturned face.

“The moment you decided you wanted to forget about it guaranteed you’d never forget about it, obviously. People don’t even remember the things they can forget. It’s because you can’t forget it that you want to forget it. I think if you’re hurting because of it, there’s not much you can do about it.”

“But...I need to forget it. I think they want me to forget...” As though pushing back on Minori’s fingers, Ryuuji turned his face to her. Minori didn’t ask “what” or “who,” but just listened as he talked to himself. “That’s why I want to forget.”

That wasn’t entirely true. It wasn’t as though Taiga wanted him to forget. She hadn’t intended to tell him in the first place. Taiga’s thoughts on the matter were that things would be fine if she never told him and kept everything closed up inside forever.

That was why—that was why. That was why he needed to forget—

“I’m jealous of you because you look ahead. It’s because you actually move on. How can I look forward like you?”

Minori was silent for a while. Eventually, she puckered her lips and blew out a breath of white air.

“It’s about *deciding*.”

A grin spread over her face.

“You have to decide the direction you want to go. If you can’t do that, you wouldn’t be able to tell where forward is, right? Takasu-kun, where are you headed? Is there a place you want to be? If you don’t have that, you can’t move on.”

A place he was headed.

A place he wanted to be.

When she told him that, Ryuuji once again realized he didn’t have a reply for her.

Even he didn’t know where he was headed or where he wanted to be. He might never have had a destination in him to begin with.

Ah, I see—I just can’t move forward. Of course I’d never end up anywhere. I didn’t even realize it, but I’ve just been staring up at the sky.

“Kushieda, do you know where you’re heading?”

“Of course!” Minori didn’t hesitate to reply. She danced out behind Ryuuji and hopped lightly, ignoring how her skirt flipped up with her exaggerated movements as she deftly motioned as though to throw a ball. It was an underthrow. Her hair bounced over her shoulder. Minori’s eyes seemed to follow the path of the distant ball.

Ryuuji was more jealous than anything of how her eyes could look like that.

Quite a few students passed through just before the lunch break ended. Ryuuji and Minori had talked too long and froze themselves to the bone, so they were both shivering as they made their way down the stairs. They saw the person at pretty much the same time.

“Oh. Ahmin!”

Kawashima Ami had just come out of the staff room.

It seemed as though she alone floated out from among the throng of

students. Her long arms and legs, her slender figure, her height, her white skin—everything about her stood out from the passersby. Ryuuji was firmly reminded again of how different Ami's presence was from the rest of them.

Her beautiful face, which seemed to have a faint glow to it, turned to them when she heard Minori's voice. Minori lifted up a hand and waved it at her.

“...”

Ami acted as though she didn't notice. Without even looking at them, she left. Minori silently put down her right hand.

“Are you still fighting?” Ryuuji asked.

“I'd say we're in the middle of making up...or at least I am.”

Minori didn't stop. She kept moving forward in the hallway Ami had just walked through.

It seemed that even Minori had unfinished business.

“We juuust talked about this yesterday, didn't we?” As she mixed her natto beans, Yasuko's already round eyes became even rounder. She looked quizzically at her son, who was sitting across from her. “You just gotta write ‘Imma work hard at studying!’ Why didn't you turn it in?”

“We're not done with this conversation yet.”

He had prepared dinner earlier than usual and waited until they were eating to talk.

“I want you to really think about it seriously.”

“I am sooo serious.”

“Even if I go to a public school that's close to home, I've talked to a ton of people, and it'll apparently cost about ten million yen for four years. If I only get into private schools, it'll cost even more. How're we going to do that?”

“Huh? There aren't any good places around that you can get to from home. You can't do that! You've got a good head, Ryuu-chan, so if you can get into a private school you should. You should aim for a good one in Tokyo!”

Natto explosion! Whoo, it's so stretchy-wetchy! Yasuko pushed a natto bean, followed by a trailing thread into Inko-chan's birdcage.

"Ahhh!" Inko-chan turned around, slobbering, and took the bean in her beak. Their bird could even eat natto.

"Like I said, that's not what we're discussing."

Yasuko's bowl, the table, the birdcage, and even Inko-chan's beak were connected by a stretchy string of natto. Ryuuji grimaced as he twirled his chopsticks in the air and reeled in the thread. Yasuko had no makeup on and was in a fleece jacket from Uniqlo, and, of course, still had her hair up in a bun as she happily slurped at her miso soup. Her eyes were glued to the TV. She probably intended to sing at the store today, but was humming a pop song that was likely two generations obsolete.

"Ah!"

Ryuuji turned off the TV.

"The point is, with the way our finances are, it'll be tough for me to go to college."

"That's so not true!"

Yasuko pouted and tried to take back the remote, but Ryuuji quickly hid it under his sitting cushion.

"It'll be tough. Accept that."

"Why? That's not true. Next year, you're a third year, and after that, you have four more years, right? It's not like my salary's going to get lower or something."

"How can you be sure? For starters, what're you going to do if the store goes out of business?"

"It won't. We've got tons of customers."

"Maybe the owner will make a mistake with another store."

"Huh? You can't know that'll happen."

"Like I said, you don't know what'll happen... After I graduate, I'll join the

workforce right away and make enough income for both of us to eat. I'll save up, and then, later, I might be able to go to college. That, or I'll find a place that'll give me enough scholarships to—"

"You can't do that!"

For once, Yasuko stuck her face right up to him and loudly shot him down.

"Ryuu-chan, you're going to study as much as you can and go straight to the best school there is! If they give you scholarships that means you're the best they have, right? You can't do that! You need to jump into a place that's filled with tons of A-students so you can study up! Unlike me, you're smart, so you need to get the best education you can, and stretch yourself as much as you can, and have the beeeeeest life you can. ☆ That's why you can't work hard at anything that isn't studying! Look, there's that thing people say, right... My teachers used to say it a lot when I was going to school. What was it again, um... If you rub...the family jewels...they'll glow...or something?"

"If you polish a gem, it'll glitter?"

"That's it! Ryuu-chan, next year you go into the smart class and study your brains out and go to study hall and prep school for the entrance exams and then take the tests. Whoo! ☆ I wonder what kind of path you'll go down? I'm looking forward to it! Maybe medical school? Or maybe you'll be a vet? A pharmacist or a dentist? A scientist would be great, too! It would be great if you studied the latest advances or became a lawyer or maybe you're suited for something else! Right! How about you go overseas? I'd be so lonely! But I think I could be patient for you!"

"..."

He couldn't say anything anymore. The son was speechless as he looked back at his mother, who was seeing rose-colored dreams of the future. She brought her Kyoto-style pickled fish to her mouth and nibbled on it. She liked it when it was slightly singed.

How idiotic.

She was going on about him being a doctor? What was she saying? Apologize to the whole country's medical exam test takers and their parents, why don't

you?

As he mixed his natto in irritation, Ryuuji finally thought of a way to make his mother see the real world. He skillfully wrapped the strings of natto around his chopsticks and cut it off, then rudely walked on his hands and knees to the dresser in the corner of the room. He opened a drawer, took out a bankbook, and thrust it in front of Yasuko.

“Hm? Hm! We actually have a lot tucked away! Eh heh!”

He felt like falling over but desperately pushed through.

“Does it look like we have a lot to you? Half of this is going to go to spring term class fees. Plus monthly rent, heat and electricity, and living expenses, and then you need clothes and makeup since you work in hospitality, and we can’t skimp on that. No matter how much we cut, we can barely save anything each month. At this rate, where would the money come from for me to go to med school?”

“Uhhh?”

“Don’t go ‘Uhhh!’ Ugh, I really need to get a part-time job. If I can at least bring in fifty thousand yen in a month...”

“You can’t! You can’t work!”

Yasuko threw up her hand. The strings of the natto dangled in the air from her chopsticks, and Ryuuji, flustered, tried to reel it in.

“If you work, you wouldn’t be able to study! Plus, there’s no meaning to living a life eating cold meals separately from your kid every day! That wouldn’t be a good life at all! You can’t say stuff like that!”

“It’s because you keep talking about me going to college that we have to talk about this!”

He almost felt like the last two years had been wasted. If he had worked with the same intensity that Minori had, then he might have saved up enough by now. He might have made enough that they wouldn’t have to have this painful argument.

“It’ll be fine! It’ll turn out okay!”

Yasuko flashed him a peace sign and smiled. That face normally always made Ryuuji go silent. If Yasuko, the adult, said it, it felt as though things really would turn out fine—but Takasu Ryuuji was seventeen, nearing eighteen. He could finally see the truth.

There were things that even your parents could do nothing about. You couldn't believe your parents when they said, "It'll be fine." Yasuko had probably been doing everything she could to make sure Ryuuji never had a single worry.

It'll be fine, it'll turn out okay, I'm your mom so just leave it to me. As long as you've got me, everything will be fine...

Just because you haven't got a dad doesn't mean that you're any less well off than the other kids. Your mom's a super mom! Mom's forever young and always cute! Also, what have we got here?! Mom has a special psychic power! So, if anyone tries to grab you, I'll be right there to save you, Ryu-chan. If you're in an accident, I can make it like it never happened. Money grows on trees. You don't have to worry about a single little thing. Just leave it all to Mom.

We'll be happy forever.

"I don't think it'll turn out fine..."

The gentle fairy tales of his childhood were over. Ryuuji believed that.

"It will be! I'll do something about it! So Ryu-chan, don't worry about money. ☆"

Yasuko nodded broadly. But Ryuuji wasn't a kid who would fall for that anymore.

Yasuko went to work. Unable to write anything for his future aspirations printout, Ryuuji ended up doing the laundry and his homework instead. He was bored, but didn't feel in the mood to watch TV, so he lackadaisically caught up on his English studies. With his natural-born attention to detail, he wrote up the spellings for his English vocabulary, but then his mechanical pencil paused.

Where was he headed, earnestly studying like this? He didn't have a place he

wanted to go, and he didn't have the ability to get to the place he was supposed to go, anyway—he stopped himself from going any further. If he took one wrong step, he might tumble into an unbelievably despairing world.

When he looked outside the window, Taiga's bedroom light was still on. He could see an even stronger light on inside, which could have been her desk light.

Taiga might be studying...or she might be reading a manga or a magazine. She might have been on the internet and coarsely slurping down cup ramen. Ryuuji put his hand to the cold window and stared for a while. However, in the end, he couldn't see Taiga beyond the curtain. He didn't have any reason to, so he couldn't call her either. He had just wanted to check whether he could see her.

Taiga was heading in the direction of not being able to tell him her feelings. She had turned her back to Ryuuji and decided to move forward by sealing them away. In that case, Taiga would end up growing more and more distant until he lost sight of her. Even if things remained unchanged, even if she humored Ryuuji, Taiga was leaving him behind.

Ryuuji, who was left behind with nowhere to go, had no one—not even Taiga—to take responsibility for him.

Tired, he tossed away the pencil.

Chapter 3

Huh. Taiga blinked slowly, twice.

“A cake shop? You mean Ya-chan?”

Ryuuji nodded in response.

“Yeah. From Monday to Friday, from ten to four. She’s getting nine hundred yen an hour.”

“But Ya-chan always sleeps till noon, doesn’t she? She doesn’t even get home until four or five in the morning. What’s up with that?”

“I tried stopping her, of course, but she decided to just do it and started working last week.”

“Really...?”

Taiga’s eyes were filled with ambiguous blame, but Ryuuji really had tried to stop Yasuko as soon as he heard she was doing it. It was just that he couldn’t force her to stop when she was working while he was at school.

It was after school now, and they were in the interview room that was also commonly referred to as the “lecture room.” Ryuuji and Taiga were waiting for their teacher to make an appearance.

Ryuuji sat at the desk that was installed in the center of the room so that four seated people could look at each other, and Taiga was standing in the doorway. In order to keep Ryuuji completely out of her vision, she rudely sat down on the windowsill, letting her feet swing under her.

The sealed-off air of the four-and-a-half-tatami room felt strangely quiet. Even the voices of the clubs out on the grounds faintly echoed the moment their conversation cut off. The silence brought increasing pressure with it.

“It’s just that, that—”

Rata tat tat tat. Ryuuji hit the desk with his fingertips as though playing an unplayable piano.

“She said that it’s on the same street as her job right now. She said they were advertising for a part-time job, and she was saying she might be able to bring home the leftover cake, too, or something...”

“You really just can’t shut up.”

“What?”

“That *tap tap tap tap* thing you’re doing.”

Taiga leaned her weight on the window frame as she unskillfully jerked around the fingers on both her hands. Ryuuji got what she was trying to say and laid his hands on top of each other on the desk.

After school the day before, Taiga had happened to run into Yasuko in front of her condo as she was going home, and found out Yasuko had taken on an afternoon job.

“But I wonder why Ya-chan’s gotten another job.”

“It’s because I talked to her about how I might not be able to go to college since we don’t have money. The day after I said that, she said she’d do something about it and went and found a job.”

“So it’s your college fund... Being a ‘mom’ is so hard.”

“I probably got called here because I didn’t turn in my future aspirations printout because of all the stuff going on, but why’re you stuck here?”

“I didn’t turn it in either. I’m pretty sure we’re here for the same reason.”

“Why’d you not turn it in? Is it because you don’t wanna talk to your parents about it?”

“No, that’s not even close to it. It was just such a bother that I forgot to do it.”

Taiga, still sitting on the counter, twisted so she could breathe on the windowpane. She used her fingertip to draw a heart in the spot that fogged up.

“Uh...”

Though she was scribbling nonchalantly, Ryuuji had a legitimate reaction to her doodle. His shoulders pointedly shuddered. What was Taiga trying to tell him? The heart was an expression of L-O-V-E, and the object of Taiga’s affection

was—

“Look, Ryuuji...”

“Y-yeah...”

“Praying mantis.”

“I see...!”

He wanted to slump face down on the desk. The thing he thought was a heart was actually a praying mantis’s head. She had drawn in the eyes, its feelers, its body, its sickles, and given it legs, and then she had written its name above it —“PRAYING MANTIS!” In that case, that probably really was a praying mantis. It wasn’t a heart or her L-O-V-E or anything else.

“Do you even know how to write the Japanese characters for praying mantis?”

“You write the character for ‘bug’ and ‘wealthy’ and give them little swipes at the top... Then you write ‘bug’ again and the character from the name ‘Ichiro’...”

“The character from the name ‘Ichiro?’ For a bug? Doesn’t that sound kind of off?”

Ryuuji raised his head and sighed. This idiot—Taiga hadn’t been trying to tell him her feelings at all.

“Actually, you’re completely confused about how a praying mantis is supposed to look in the first place. Praying mantis’ bodies don’t look like that. They’re divided up into their neck, their chest, and their long abdomen. They’ve got wings, too. Have you seen one before?”

“I have. I saw one crossing the street at a crosswalk the other day. Minorin poked it around with her umbrella tip, and it ran away.”

“The other day? Was that really a praying mantis? The way you drew it with that body, it just looks like a person with a really long torso. Bugs are supposed to be, like, more divided up.”

Ryuuji stood up and stepped over to where Taiga was sitting on the windowsill and put his foot up halfway on it. He then stretched himself out and started scribbling and correcting the praying mantis drawing Taiga had made

from top to bottom.

“Hey! My praying mantis!”

“Don’t make it a big deal.”

The line of the abdomen Ryuuji’s finger traced turned to water droplets and dripped down the cold window. *Haah*. He breathed out on it and drew over the doodle with a strangely realistic praying mantis. No one could underestimate a former elementary school boy. He definitely hadn’t made Yasuko cry by collecting a bag full of butterflies to show off and forgetting them in the corner of a room.

“And their wings look like this, and their abdomens are like suuu-per long.”

“Ick! What is that thing?! That’s wrong! That just looks weird! They definitely don’t look like that!”

Ryuuji leaned his shoulder over to guard off Taiga’s pale hand, which tried to fidget with the praying mantis he had drawn from the side.

“I’m telling you this is how they look. And then, right here from its abdomen, it’s got a hairy larva like schloooooop.”

“Wh-what?! What’s that line supposed to be?! Why has it got a line coming out of it from *there*?!”

“That’s right, they’re super gross! When you put a larva in the water, it goes like thi—whoa!”

“Ahh!”

Clatter! A loud sound erupted as the plank Ryuuji had put too much weight on came off the sill. The moment he had gotten a little too into trying to creep her out about the larva, he had put another foot on the board, and the corner had sprung up and jammed into his shin.

“Ou...chhh...!”

“Ahhh, that was so scary! Isn’t that like the stupidest way in the world you can hurt yourself?! Whoa, you’re bleeding...”

He sat down on the counter and rolled up his pants to reveal his scraped leg.

Blood really was seeping out of it. It was just a scrape, so it would be fine as long as he just held a tissue down on it for a while.

“Damn, that larva...! It didn’t get enough revenge back then, and curses me even now.”

“What do you mean, back then?”

“When I was a kid, I saw one for the first time in the park swamp, so I threw a praying mantis at it and ran away, but then my leg got stuck in the swamp! I couldn’t even get back the shoe I was wearing, so I ended up having to go home in my bare feet.”

“Actually, when you say you were a kid...you mean you were in elementary school...so you had one of those cute little backpacks on...”

He didn’t know what she was imagining, but Taiga’s abdominal muscles twitched, and she started laughing out loud. *Aha aha aha*. She covered her mouth and gave Ryuuji glances as she said, “With that face.” ...*Please, just stop*.

“Don’t laugh. Everyone’s been in elementary school at some point in their life!”

“But your time was special! Aha ha, I wish I could have seen it!”

Ryuuji, irritated, shifted on his butt away to the edge of the sill. *Damn it*. Taiga kept laughing and muttered, “A Ryuuji even tinier than me.” She happily clapped her small hands together.

The time when the person you like was small is special, or whatever, I guess.

He glanced stealthily at Taiga who was caught up in glee and let his imagination roam. He wondered whether Taiga secretly cherished these moments when Ryuuji talked about the memories of his youth or when they had short, mundane conversations like they were now.

“Because I can’t help but like Ryuuji.”

Did she relive these moments by herself, unable to tell anyone, all alone, with a hidden smile she couldn’t let anyone else see? Would she remember these moments again and again, until over the month and years, they would fade from her memory?

“How long are you gonna keep laughing...?”

“Ugh, I feel so stupid. It just sort of got me. Ugh! Come to think of it—right!”

They sat on the same counter but were still far apart. Directly to the side of him, Taiga continued to smile as she clapped her hands together and turned her face to Ryuuji.

“The ramen place Minorin works at really got me, too! You’ve gone, right? Minorin mentioned it!”

“Yeah...so you went there, too? With who?”

“By myself. Minorin invited me, and at first I didn’t want to go, but when I sat down at the counter, it was fine. It’s like, ‘What is this? It’s so good!’ That spray of boiling water is kind of a hazard though.”

“You mean the reincarnation cycle, right?”

“Their normal ramen topped with garlic is the best! I’ve gone three times now. You’ve only gone once?”

“Yeah. I just went with Haruta and Noto. The line was super long.”

“You should go more often! There weren’t a lot of people lined up before six, and Minorin was so sad. She was saying, ‘Takasu-kun and the rest of them only came by once and haven’t come back a single time.’”

Isn’t that great, Taiga implicitly said by shrugging her shoulders and curling the corners of her mouth up slightly. *Isn’t that great Minorin is thinking about you?*

She probably didn’t say that out loud because she’d decided not to intervene unless Ryuuji asked for help. Ryuuji still didn’t respond as he looked back at Taiga’s face.

He wanted to look at her face—the face of the person who gave Minorin the hairpin present Ryuuji hadn’t been able to hand over, who looked for that present when it had fallen on top of the snow, who stepped out onto a cliff, and who went missing in the blizzard.

He wanted to know what Taiga could have been thinking after she forgot what she told him—*It’s because I like Ryuuji*—and now that she was still

worrying about Minori. Even if he knew that slightly meddlesome kindness was her way of showing goodwill, Ryuuji still wanted to know what could have driven Taiga to do that. If it was hurting her, he wanted her to stop. *Don't do it*, he wanted to tell her.

Taiga didn't mind Ryuuji's silence. She twisted her slender body to press her forehead to the windowpane so she could look outside.

Her grown-out bangs reached the tip of her nose, and the line from her forehead to her chin glowed faintly white. He didn't know where she was looking with her downturned eyes, but her expression as she did so was unexpectedly mature. Even her fingertips, touching the window glass, were devoid of any child-like roundness. Her slender fingers tapered elegantly to her long, rounded fingernails.

The doodle of the praying mantis had formed into droplets on the window and long dripped entirely away.

Kushieda will never like me. If he tried telling her that again, would Taiga deny him? *There's no way. Minorin likes you*—would she say something like that again? *Minorin must have just gotten the wrong idea about the relationship we have with each other.*

What if I said that Kushieda knows that you like me, so she'd never like me...?

He thought Taiga would instantly reply back, *Then I'll stop liking you. It'll be fine because I'll pray to the Patron Saint of Broken Hearts for my feelings to disappear.*

Her prayer hadn't been fulfilled, then. Right, it was during New Year's, when she was with Kitamura... No, it must have been when she had gone shrine-visiting with Kitamura. In order to cheer on Minori and Ryuuji more than she already had been despite the fact their bond had been severed on Christmas Eve, she had decided to erase her own feelings.

Ryuuji was still speechless. Taiga's beautifully maintained nail tips were thin and transparent. He just stared at the light shining through them.

When Taiga went missing, he thought everything was so straightforward. He would never let go of Taiga's hand again, no matter how it looked to everyone

else. If that was how terrible letting her go would make him feel, then he would never leave Taiga's side.

"Koigakubo Yuri, you're late..." Taiga swung her feet as she let the complaint slip out.

Ryuuji closed his eyes and tried to pull through the sudden blizzard that chilled his whole body.

Taiga had abandoned him to fend for himself in that place.

It was Taiga who let go of his hand, and who was leaving him further and further behind.

The sound of his own heart echoed hotly in the back of his ears. Because of that, his ears and throat hurt. His face felt strangely hot, and he tried to act natural as he held his cheeks in his hands.

"Seriously, what is that spinster doing after she was the one who called us out here like this—whoa?!"

"Ahh?!"

It happened in that moment.

CLATTER! An even louder ruckus than the last echoed as the top plank of the windowsill tilted forward, tossing Ryuuji and Taiga down onto the floor. Unable to withstand the weight of the two high school students, it finally broke.

"Wh-wh-wh-what just happened?!"

Taiga made a full rotation and plopped on the ground in a seated position. Ryuuji, being Ryuuji, made an abrupt landing on his knees and was rubbing his incredibly numb kneecaps. In times like these, the differences between their reflexes really became obvious.

"Hhhhhgh!" Ryuuji wailed soundlessly as the door opened in front of his eyes.

"Sorry for making you wai...oh! You broke the furniture!"

As she came into the interview room, Koigakubo Yuri's mouth gaped wide open, and the bachelorette (age 30) seemed to purposefully drop the writing instruments she held on the floor. She had a taste for relics of the past century.

“We didn’t! It was just a poltergeist!”

What a shame! Taiga made a huge deal out of it as the bachelorette homeroom teacher grabbed Taiga’s hand, pulled the girl up to her feet, and sighed. “What am I supposed to do with this?” she muttered as she glanced at the misplaced middle plank. “Really now. Ahhh, I can’t believe you did this! You two sat on it, didn’t you?!”

I have no idea what happened, even Ryuuji and Taiga’s breathing were in sync as they both identically waved their hands rapidly in front of their faces. However, the lines of doodles on the window were unshakable evidence, and even though nothing remained of the doodles except vestiges of water, Koigakubo Yuri had already seen through the whole tragedy. She looked at the two problem children as though exasperated.

“Oh well... Here, take a seat!” Her tough face was three times more intense than usual.

“I don’t want to! Oh, it’s already past four! It’s time to leave, so I’m going home!”

That face seemed to have no effect on Taiga.

“No, no, you can’t! It’ll be really fast!”

Taiga sulked like a child as the bachelorette teacher grabbed her hand and made her sit in the chair next to Ryuuji. Taiga reflexively braced her feet and turned her head away to face the window. The bachelorette sat across from them and scowled.

“You know what we need to talk about, right? Why haven’t either of you turned in your future aspirations survey yet?”

“I’m—well, sorry, I still haven’t been able to come to an agreement with my mom...” Ryuuji uneasily replied. Taiga remained silent as she scratched a spot right below her nose. Her expression said that she considered the whole situation to be somebody else’s problem.

“Takasu-kun, Aisaka-san, you both have good grades, so at least just choose whether you want the humanities or science course. I think you would both automatically get into the class you want.”

“Wait, about that... Please wait a second. Just actually take a moment.”

“Takasu-kun, you said you were hesitating because of your financial situation, right? This is ultimately just a survey to split the classes. This paper isn’t going to decide what recommendations for colleges you get, or anything like that at all. You don’t need to worry so much.”

She spread out new printouts in front of them and placed two pencils on top of the desk. It seemed the single teacher was telling them, “Write something down right now.” However, Ryuuji obstinately pushed the paper back at the homeroom teacher.

“But...if I actually went to college because of this, and actually got into a public school, I think I wouldn’t be able to change my mom’s mind. Actually... right. Next year, my mom really will expect me to go to college, and I’ll really be in hot water.”

That was just his current situation. If he took the college exams and got slammed with real bills, just how much more work would Yasuko try to take on?

“I don’t want to get her hopes up and then betray her. I don’t want her to go through all that trouble. That’s why I want my mom to actually accept that I’m not going to college anytime soon. I don’t have a dad, and I don’t want to cause any more trouble for my mom.”

“Is the only hurdle your financial situation? It’s not as though everyone who wants to go to college is rich. If you want to go, you could get scholarships or a low interest student loan. We have national aid just exactly for kids like you.”

“Please give those to someone who wants to go more than me.”

“Then in other words...”

Koigakubo Yuri leaned back slightly and locked her eyes directly on Ryuuji’s face.

“You yourself, Takasu-kun, want to go straight into the workforce? Your mom hopes you’ll go to college, but you’re saying that’s impossible because of your financial situation?”

“I think that’s what’ll end up happening in the end... My mom’s just got her

head in the clouds, and she's insisting on the impossible. I can't get through to her at all, so I couldn't get my thoughts together until now."

"Takasu-kun, um, there's just one other thing I want to bring up."

When the teacher tapped a pen against the desk, Ryuuji's eyes went to her hands automatically.

"In the last few years, this school's employment rate has been *zero*. Some kids didn't get work or just fell flat on their face, but we haven't had a single student graduate in March with a full-time job lined up for April. Other schools have career guidance or job offers from companies every year or qualifications curriculums to get third year students jobs by spring, but that's not our school. I'd like you to consider that."

In other words, she was probably trying to say, *Going to this school isn't going to get you a job*. Ryuuji couldn't clearly see the intent behind what his teacher was saying. He felt a bit overwhelmed.

"I'm not even thinking of anything big like that... It's not like I want to do something specific or anything. It's just, when I finish school, I want to get a stable income as soon as possible. That's it."

"If that's really what you *want* to do, Takasu-kun, then I'll try to help you as much as I can. You could start a part-time job after the midterm tests. I think it'd be good if you got some work experience."

"A part-time job—well...right."

"But, Takasu-kun, I can't help but think...you haven't ever rebelled against your mother up until this point, right?"

"Huh...? What? Rebelled?"

Ryuuji tilted his head to the side quizzically. He thought that she would continue to explain what she meant, but instead she continued, "So based on what we've just talked about, Takasu-kun, I'd like you to think this over again. So then—"

Koigakubo Yuri turned to the next problem child, Aisaka Taiga.

"What about you, Aisaka-san? What are you thinking about for your future?"

“I don’t want to say this right after Ryuuji’s said that about money, but...” Taiga glanced at Ryuuji’s face before she muttered in a low voice, “I’m rich. I don’t need to lift a finger for the rest of my life, so there’s no reason for me to study. I don’t have anything I want to do, either. When my parents pass away, they’ll probably leave me with money, so I’ll just live on that until I die. So...I don’t have anything to write on this piece of paper.”

“Why are you...both so...”

Koigakubo Yuri held her head and practically fell over on the desk.

“You don’t want to do anything—anything at all...? You can put down whatever you want. If there’s anything you’re interested in or that’s aspirational... For example, you could even write ‘I want to be a singer!’ You could write that you want to draw manga or that you want to make traveling your job. Right, you could even be a schoolteacher, ha! How about that? Huh? You don’t like that?”

Taiga pouted in silence, exchanging a look with Ryuuji from the corner of her eyes. The three of them were silent for a bit. Eventually, Ryuuji was the one who bit the bullet.

“Is deciding not to go to college really that weird or crazy?”

Not at all! The bachelorette shook her head vigorously side to side.

“That’s not the issue. It’s just...look inward a bit more and focus on how you’d like to live for yourself in the next ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty years. All I want is for you both to think about it. You can’t blame anyone else, and no one else can take that responsibility.”



“I’m fine with this.”

Ryuuji made up his mind once and for all as he took the pencil and smoothly wrote words in the blank space. His hope was to take the “science course.” After graduation he “wanted to work.”

The issue was just that he hadn’t gotten consent from his mother—but that was probably fine at this point.

He had tried his best to make Yasuko see the truth, and even tried talking to her about it more than once. If she didn’t get it even after that, he wasn’t going to be so gung-ho about getting parental permission. He would decide things for himself and work toward everything himself. That was all he could do. He believed there wasn’t any other way.

If someone said that wasn’t what he “wanted,” then what did he want? He didn’t even have a place to go or a direction he was heading in, so where was he supposed to set sail to fulfill his desires?

Nothing would come of it. This was all he could do.

“Yasuko...my mom refuses to acknowledge that I have to give up on going to college because of our financial problems, and I think that’s what’s holding her back. She’s been trying as hard as she can to be a good parent for me until now, and she’s done everything possible to keep me from being worried. I don’t want her to have to tough it out anymore. That’s what I hope for.”

2-C, *Takasu Ryuuji*. He signed the printout and pushed it towards the teacher. The teacher’s lips, which were lined with a beige-ish shade of pink, moved faintly as though she wanted to say something, but instead she replied, “I see... Then I’ll take this.”

She put the printout into a binder. Taiga watched that with bright eyes.

“Then do something about the window, have Aisaka-san write something, and then you can go home. If you can, please bring the printout to the staff room.”

Koigakubo Yuri left the interview room with those parting words. Ryuuji sighed. He felt incredibly tired, but he still needed to do physical labor. He certainly was at fault though, so he had nothing to complain about.

“Ah well, I’ll work on this stuff, so you just hurry up and finish writing something up.”

“I’ll help with that, too.”

“If you help, it’ll take way longer, you klutz. If you want to hurry and get home, write that up.”

Hmph, Taiga reclined in her chair.

“Who cares about the future? It’s stupid... What’s going to happen if I write something on this paper? I can’t believe you’re being such a goody-two-shoes about this. You’re going to work? Like really? You haven’t even had a part-time job before.”

“That’s what I came up with after seriously thinking about it. I just never had a part-time job because Yasuko would have stopped me... You’ve gotta think about this stuff, too. You’ve got to think about yourself seriously every once in a while.”

He decided to place the thin inner metal plank in first. Luckily, the board itself hadn’t folded over or warped at all, so all he had to do was watch his fingers and stick it back in. Ryuuji picked up the somewhat hefty plank and swallowed his breath. “Oof,” he supported the plank with his knees and stuck it back into the middle of the sill.

Taiga was silent for a while as she watched him, but then slowly pulled the printout over to herself and crouched over it. He thought she had finally gotten in the mood to write something down.

“Tah-dah!”

“What do you think you’re doing?! Hey, wait a sec! Stop that! Why you!”

Taiga had a simple, folded paper airplane pinched in her right hand. Before Ryuuji could even stop her, Taiga stood from her chair and opened the window.

“Fly with the wind!”

“Ah!”

She aimed the airplane out into the midwinter air and threw it out past the dripping praying mantis. The plane drifted on the wind better than expected

and eventually did a somersault in the dark skies before falling straight to the ground.

“You...idiot! How could you do something like that?! We’re going to get it! Are you serious?!”

“It’s fine, I don’t need that thing. Just leave it.”

Taiga was still looking out the window as though it had become someone else’s problem. She wasn’t looking for the now out of sight paper airplane. She snorted haughtily, so that Ryuuji could see the white puff of her breath.

“I don’t need that thing. Who cares about the future? Who cares about having interests? Nobody knows what’ll happen with that stuff. No one can see what’s going to happen in the future—not even me. I don’t want anyone telling me what to do like they know. What am I supposed to write? What am I supposed to hope for? Even if I have aspirations, they won’t come true anyway. Even if I do everything I can, I fell off a cliff, and all I did was cause problems, didn’t I? I realized that while I was licking my own wounds.”

At the intensity of the words she spat out, Ryuuji didn’t know how to reply. But the things he had been thinking and Taiga’s words had suddenly synchronized.

“Thinking about it is useless...but I know you’re going to tell me ‘Don’t say that’ anyway.”

“I’m not.”

Taiga turned around at Ryuuji’s words.

“I’m thinking...the same thing as you,” he said.

Taiga watched Ryuuji nod as he spoke. Her large eyes grew even wider. *I don’t want to say this, but*, he prefaced his words before he continued, “We’re weird, aren’t we? I’m poor, and you’re rich. We’re in completely opposite situations, but I guess the end result is the same.”

“Why... But didn’t you want to go work?”

“If someone asked me whether I actually wanted to work, well, I can’t say yes. I think Miss Single is telling me all this stuff because she knows. This is just how

reality is. Because of how reality is and because doing anything else wouldn't result in anything, I just thought it'd be better if I chose to work. I thought that had to be the 'right answer.' That's what I 'want.'"

When he tried saying it out loud, he backtracked, *That's pretty irresponsible*. He understood why his teacher had reason to worry.

He was sure that once he failed, he would just end up saying, "But that was all I could do right then!" He was doing it for Yasuko's sake, so he was right.

He knew he was planning out an escape route before he even progressed forward. He really was doing this for Yasuko, but he also knew that he was just justifying his choice. He was trying to put himself in a safe zone. He was escaping into the protection of overwhelming righteousness. He wanted the world to think, "Takasu Ryuuji made the right choice." "He's a good kid."

In actuality, he knew. Ryuuji just didn't have the courage to look into the hollow cavity that was a gaping, terrifying maw inside of him. He knew he didn't have the courage to face the powerlessness he felt from not having a place to go.

He wasn't tough enough to watch and believe in the trajectory of the ball he had thrown with his own hands. He also wasn't brave enough to just send his future flying right into the midwinter sky. That was all this was.

"Don't you think I'm pitiful? Why don't you criticize me for it the way you normally do?"

"You..."

However, Taiga didn't insult him. She didn't yell *You dog!* or *You pig!* at him or call him an insect or a pile of dung or a lecher. Her mouth twisted, and she dropped her eyes to her own toes. Her voice got low.

"If you're calling yourself pitiful then...what am I supposed to be?"

The Palmtop Tiger, who supposedly knew no fear, put her head down.

"At least you're looking toward what's ahead. It feels like you're thinking about what you can do, like you're making the best of it. I...I can only see what's in front of me right now."

Taiga's gaze might have been following the curve the paper plane had traced. The winter sky started to become even darker, and the far-off streets blackened until they looked like waves piling on each other at the edge of the ocean.

"I've just been in denial about who I am for so, soo, soooooo long. I've been thinking about why I ended up like this and what I could have done to avoid turning out this way."

That's all I can do, Taiga continued to murmur as she stood up.

"For example, if my parents were just normal parents...if I could have had a normal life and if the three of us lived in my condo together as a family, I wonder what would have happened? What do you think?"

She turned her back to Ryuuji, pushing her face against the windowpane.

"If I'd lived next to you in a normal three-person family, and we met like normal people do when we were put in the same class in April, I wonder what would have happened to us?"

Ryuuji tilted his head slightly at the word "normal" that Taiga kept repeating. Then he thought about it. In April, he had been so happy about being in the same class as Kushieda Minori. Everyone around him still confused him for a delinquent. What would have happened if he met Taiga then?

"I wonder if you would have still put a love letter for Kitamura in my bag..."

"Who knows? I might have."

"Then you would have snuck into my house... That's the kind of girl you are. Well, it doesn't matter. You would have come to my house, settled things, and then gone home like a normal person—right. If you had a normal family, you wouldn't come by my place all the time. For starters, you wouldn't even be able to sneak in because you would have parents to stop you. If that happened, I might have never gotten to know you. You might not have gotten to know me, either."

You might not have ended up liking me—of course he couldn't say that out loud. Ryuuji still thought it as he used his knees to bring up the top plank of the counter that had come loose.

“But I think things would have been better if I’d just been normal...” Taiga grumbled as though she were speaking to herself. She still had her back turned toward Ryuuji.

“Oh, right!” She was excited now, as though she had suddenly thought of a joke. “I did want something—I wanted to love someone like normal!”

“Huh...?”

BAM! The plank he had been holding fell.

He fixed his positioning in a fluster, but he couldn’t regain the breath that had flown out of him. What did she just blurt out? *Love? Love?! That basically means...*

Basically, she means me?!

Ryuuji hesitantly brought up his face to look at Taiga. His neck was stiff, and he was shaking to an embarrassing degree. *Taiga, what are you trying to start?* What kind of expression did she have on her face when she made that explosive declaration?

“I’d be normal and grow up in a normal house and grow up to be a nice, normal girl and meet someone like normal and get to know them like normal and then we’d have normal...I just wanted to fall in love with someone like normal! I wanted to like someone and have someone like me and for the two of us to just be together. We’d just be together and—” Taiga continued. “...We’d just be happy as long as we were together or something like that. That’s the love I want.”

Taiga didn’t seem like she was pretending to like someone specific. Her face was contorted painfully, as though her stomach hurt. *That expression doesn’t really match what you’re saying,* he wanted to quip back.

Why did she have such a glum look on her face when she was spending time with Takasu Ryuuji, the very person she couldn’t help but like? Her eyes seemed clouded over and dull; she seemed to be gasping with her open mouth, and her eyebrows knit together as though she were in pain.

Huh? The moment he thought that, the counter’s top plank snagged on a small nail and made a terrible noise. He dropped it, straining his eyes to see

Taiga's face better and suddenly was standing as straight as a rod. A feeling rose up in his chest, like something was oddly out of place. It hung over him like a dark shadow.

The thought came to him automatically, "Things are going well with your mom, right?"

He thought about whether she was tending to her wounds, alone and lost in her own thoughts.

"Why're you asking that?"

Grasping at the air, he clumsily stretched out his hand. *What?* She pushed his hand to the side easily, looking gloomy. He didn't mind. It wasn't like he'd know what to do if he touched her.

He just really did want to ask her about it. Even though her dad was the way he was, even though she was spending time with Ryuuji, and even though she just had her fill of happily spending time with her mother, why did she look like that—why was she making that face?

She looked as though she had lost everything. She looked even worse than when he first met her.

"Everything's going great," she said. "Swimmingly, in fact."

"Really?"

"No matter what I say, we're still a broken family. Even if it's not much, right now, our relationship is a lot better than what's going on with your family."

"It's not like I'm having a fight with Yasuko or anything."

Oh really? Taiga lifted her eyebrows. "That's fine in that case."

She started walking away on her own.

"Hey, where are you going?! What're you going to do about the printout?!"

"I'm going home now. I don't care about that thing."

Taiga didn't even turn around as she left the room in long strides. The door slammed shut, leaving Ryuuji behind once more. She had batted away the hand he stretched out to her, and he was all alone. It felt the same as when the snow

fell out from under his feet in his dream.

Regardless of that, he couldn't recklessly follow after Taiga.

The good kid Takasu Ryuuji-kun needed to fix the windowsill until it was perfect and to tell the bachelorette (age 30) waiting in the staff room that Taiga ran away.

He went back to the classroom, finished getting ready to go home, and got his bag. After that, Ryuuji opened the staff room door. He wasn't to blame in the first place for Taiga running home before him, but it still weighed on him slightly.

Sorry to intrude, he grumbled, lowering his head a bit as he stepped in. It was well past the time to go home, and the teachers were at their desks writing things or talking with each other. He could hear a commotion of several voices behind the partition for interviewing, even from the distance where he was.

He tried to call out to Koigakubo Yuri, who held a red pen in one of her hands and seemed to be grading a quiz.

"Ms. Koigakubo, please help convince her, too!"

A male teacher, who was the class year supervisor, poked out of the interview space and got to her first. Ryuuji swallowed his words and shied away.

"Kawashima won't listen to a word we say."

"But I told you that I have to turn you down. I told you earlier, too."

Oh. Ryuuji's eyes opened wide in spite of himself. He wasn't thinking, *I'll destroy this staff room with my evil eye beams! School coup d'état accomplished! I'm in charge starting today!* He wasn't planning anything like that at all.

"Oh..."

Ami had appeared behind the class year supervisor and another teacher, and he was just surprised by her appearance. Ami also saw Ryuuji's face, and her lips parted slightly, but she didn't exclaim, "Oh, Takasu-kun! ♥" or say anything in her usual sweet tone.

“Well, we need to respect what Kawashima-san wants... Oh, Takasu-kun! Where’s Aisaka-san?!”

“Uh, umm, she ran off.”

“What?! Why?!”

“I couldn’t convince her no matter what I said... I’m sorry. I’m going home.”

“Then can I go home, too? I’m heading home.”

“Uhhh, wait a sec, both of you!”

The bachelorette teacher looked at Ryuuji, then at Ami, and then at the teachers, who seemed to still want to say something to Ami. She looked flustered. She stood up with her pen still in her hand.

“Um, uh, just wait right there for a bit, Takasu-kun! Kawashima-san, uh—”

Ms. Koigakubo, another voice chimed in. It seemed the bachelorette (age 30) was incredibly popular that day.

“Uh, sorry, wait a sec. Huh? What is it?!”

“There’s a course content seller here.”

“Oh, right! Please wait... Th-this is bad, uhh.”

She twirled the pen in her right hand as she opened and closed her mouth. As the bachelorette (age 30) searched for words, Ryuuji could see Ami glancing at the teachers from the corner of her eyes.

“Oh, Kawashima!”

“Kawashima-san just ran away!”

Ami dashed towards the staff room door in front of her. The moment the teachers looked in that direction, Ryuuji went for the back door.

“Wait right there!” the bachelorette (age 30) yelled after him.

They met in the hallway, and assuming that the teachers wouldn’t go so far as to run after them, Ryuuji and Ami took the stairs down one step at a time. They ran to the shoe lockers as though they were racing each other. Feeling like they were partners in crime, Ryuuji tried to pick up and hand a shoe Ami dropped

back to her. The first thing she said to him—and he was pretty sure this was the first time they had talked since the school trip—was, “What’s wrong with you?! You’re so annoying! Will you do me a favor and stop following me?!”

“What?! I wasn’t trying to follow you!”

“Actually, give that back to me! What were you planning on doing with my shoe?! You sicko!”

If he hadn’t gotten annoyed about that, he wouldn’t have been human. Ryuuji was overtaken by mostly subconscious anger as his head went white for a moment, and he threw Ami’s shoe with all his might somewhere.

Fly like the wind.

Ryuuji still didn’t really comprehend how the situation had come about, but Ami told him she was officially severing ties with him earlier.

Ami apparently hated him and herself because, in her own words, they were both “stupid.” Ami mentioned Minori had turned Ryuuji down because of something Ami had said.

After that, Ami apparently decided to cut ties with Ryuuji. She told him of that decision on the second day of their school trip and it seemed she was still in the middle of ignoring him even now.

Ami tried to avoid Ryuuji and, when she couldn’t, she very obviously tried to ignore him. He wanted to say something about her attitude or at least get some sort of explanation from her, but he couldn’t even get the chance to ask anything related to that.

“You’ve gotten real far trying to ignore me up until today.”

“...”

“You’ve been ignoring Kushieda this whole time, too, haven’t you?”

“And what about that?”

“Don’t act like a little kid. What, are you in junior high? No, this is like elementary school level.”

“Sorry to say it, but I’m not thickheaded like you and Kushieda Minori.”

“What did you say? How’re we thickheaded?”

“I can’t believe you’re acting all friendly with each other like nothing happened even though you got rejected and she was the one who rejected you. The two of you are seriously just revolting.”

Their faces were right next to each other. They were so close he felt like he could even feel the heat from her breath as Ami spewed venom at him. Then, as though she were trying to cut Ryuuji off before he could even say anything, she yelled, “You threw it all the way over there!”

Ryuuji had his bag and Ami’s bag in one hand. With his other hand, he held Ami’s elbow to support Ami as she hopped forward on one foot. They were right next to each other and touching.

The shoe Ryuuji threw had traced an arc and fallen into a gathering of boys on their way home from school. Unluckily, the boys were right in the middle of a futsal match. One of them reflexively applied an amazing volley kick to the shoe, and another guy, who still hadn’t noticed that it was the school idol Amichan-sama’s shoe, caught it with his chest. He let it drop to his knee. *Shoot!* he said as he smacked it back up.

“Aha ha,” the other guy laughed as he missed it. Ami’s poor shoe cleared a line of sakura trees and bounced off the roof of the bike parking lot, then went beyond the school grounds, falling into the children’s park behind it. In order to go get the shoe they would need to go out of the school gate, do an immediate U-turn on the promenade next to it, and once again head in the direction of the park.

“This is the absolute worst. Unbelievable. The pits. I just can’t deal with this.”

“Sorry... Just sit here and wait while I go get it.”

Ryuuji had Ami sit at a bench near the entrance to the park. He left their bags with her and started walking on his own. Ami’s shoe was stuck in some desolate sand like a moai statue.

This was just too hilariously terrible. He regretted throwing it. It seemed that violence had rubbed off on him during his time with the world’s one and only

Palmtop Tiger. He tried to pat off the sand covering the shoe before he handed it back to Ami.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Ryuuji’s consideration to keep Ami’s hands and uniform safe from the sand didn’t get through to Ami at all.

“Why’re you ogling my shoe...ick. Seriously? No way.”

“Ick? Why ick?”

He didn’t know what she misunderstood him as doing, but Ami quickly grabbed her shoe back from Ryuuji’s hand.

“Takasu-kun, you’re really weirdly persistent about girls’ shoes... There really are some people like that, like actually. Boot maniacs, heel fetishists... I see, you’re a loafer freak...ahh!”

“I’m not! What’re you imagining?! Here then, get the sand off yourself!”

“Huh? Was that an order? How did this happen? Who do you think you are?”

“Fine, right, I’m sorry! It’s all completely my fault anyway!”

He stole the shoe again from Ami. *I’m! So! Sorry!* He lashed out at Ami a bit and turned the shoe over to hit it gently on the sole. The sand in it flowed out and clouded the toes of Ryuuji’s shoes.

The world was in an uproar over declining birthrates. They didn’t see a single child in the park at sunset. Several kids were running around the road at the front, but all of them were wearing alphabet-decorated backpacks from a famous college-bound study hall. They looked strangely solemn as they headed to the station.

The current inhabitants of the so-called children’s park consisted of a beautiful high school girl sitting on a bench, wearing a navy peacoat that her long, straight hair spilled over as she crossed her legs and exposed the bare sock of her shoeless foot to the open air, and some guy with a face exactly like a demon in a no-name school uniform furiously hitting sand out of a shoe.

As one more kid with a study hall bag ran by, Ami followed the student with her eyes and muttered to herself.

“Ahh, I see. Today’s already February the twelfth... The kids trying to get into private school are already in the final stages of their exam schedule.”

“Why do you know about private junior high school exams?”

“Because I did them.”

“I had no idea... So I guess you’re like Taiga. You started private school in junior—”

“I didn’t get in anywhere, so I went to public school.”

Was there anything more awkward than that...? Without thinking, Ryuuji almost tried to apologize. Even though she was already in a bad mood to start with, Ami’s expression didn’t change as she brushed aside her long hair.

“Isn’t the day after tomorrow Valentine’s Day?” Ryuuji added quietly.

“Are you looking forward to that or something?”

“No, not even a little. It hasn’t got anything to do with me,” Ryuuji replied straightforwardly. He continued to shake the sand out of her shoe. Many of the boys who lived in Japan would have the innocence that danced in their hearts on Valentine’s Day shattered between their fifth and seventh years of school. The generally accepted consensus was that any boy who said, *Huh? Don’t normal people look forward to Valentine’s?* or anything remotely similar wasn’t to be trusted.

A smile suddenly passed over Ami’s lips, and her eyes glittered like a chihuahua that found a new toy to play with as she looked into Ryuuji’s face.

“Oh reeeeeeally? Is that true? You can’t be thinking that maybe—just maybe—you might get some chocolates from a certain someone? ♥ Oh, but who knows? She’s the most blockheaded girl in the world. Her heart’s all muscle.”

Despite releasing so much vitriol, she was completely off target.

“The heart is supposed to be a muscle. Why were you being kept after school?”

He slipped past her remark like the sand flowing out of the shoe.

“What does that have to do with anything? Actually, what did *you* do, Takasu-

kun? Oh, maybe you had another bad dream and yelled again~? Were you like, ‘Tigeeeeeeeer.’ Hah, that’s sooo embarrassing. It’s unbelievable, isn’t it? What kind of dream were you even having? That’d definitely worry Yuri-chan.”

“What’re you talking about? I was just talking with her about my future... Well, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but everyone seemed pretty upset, and you don’t even know that the heart is a muscle. I wasn’t going to say anything, but your junior high school exams...turned out the way they did. Maybe you’ve got grades like Haruta’s and you got called up—”

“What?! No way! You’re so unpleasant!”

Her lips, which glittered faintly from the transparent gloss on them, contorted. Ami glared at Ryuuji. They weren’t too different in height, and though the glint in her eyes was terrible, he felt pretty shocked that she was the one telling him he was “unpleasant.”

“People call me ‘considerate Takasu’ though!”

“No one calls you that! You’re never considerate towards me! Actually, they asked me to be the model for the uniform picture in the school pamphlet this year, and I turned them down!”

“Oh, that’s it? Why don’t you just do it? That’s what you’re good at, isn’t it?”

“No, that’s *not* it! I just said okay without thinking about it the first time they asked, but...I’ve changed my mind now. I don’t want to do it. Ever.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know how long I’ll be at this school.”

“That’s—”

That’s—what?

Without thinking, Ryuuji left his mouth half-open, and he lost the rhythm of their argument as he looked back at Ami’s face. *Tch*. Ami clicked her tongue, and her face obviously showed that she’d said too much. Her forehead furrowed.

Ryuuji froze up. He forgot to ask her what she meant. She basically just implied she would be quitting school...hadn’t she?

He recalled Ami and Minori getting in a fight at the school trip. Their argument had escalated, and they started saying stuff they never should have. If his memories weren't mistaken, Minori had said some harsh words during their argument.

"You didn't take it seriously when Kushieda told you to 'go back to your own school,' did you..."

"Nooo. That's not what's going on. Ahh, this is becoming such a chore."

Ami seemed peeved as she shook her head at him. She rudely put her sock-clad foot on top of her other knee, grabbed her ankle, and hunched her back. As though trying to take stock of the conversation, she made a motion with her hand like she was grabbing a box and pretending to set it aside, but he had no idea what it meant.

"That's not what this is—whatever that girl said to me has nothing to do with this. Someone like Kushieda Minori wouldn't ever affect my life at all."

"Then why are you suddenly saying you're leaving?"

"I've been thinking about that...for a while. It's been a long time coming."

As she said that, Ami reached out her hand like she meant to take back her shoe that Ryuuji was still holding. He automatically held his arm high so that she couldn't reach. Ami sighed as though exasperated, but it seemed she didn't intend to force him to give the shoe back to her. He almost thought that he might as well send it flying again.

"Takasu-kun."

"No."

"Seriously!"

He absolutely would not hand over the shoe she needed to walk away from him in that moment. Like he'd let her have a half-baked conversation with him and then go back to ignoring him. He wasn't happy about Ami leaving school either. He was tired of being the only one left behind.

"I was really supposed to leave after the first trimester ended. That was the plan when I transferred. I thought that once the whole stalker thing died down,

I could go back to my old school or finish my degree from home.”

“After one trimester... You didn’t mention that to anyone. Were you just planning on disappearing after summer ended when we got back from the villa?”

“I was.”

“You...*Kawashima!*”

“But I didn’t. Back then, I decided to stay here for a little longer. I was thinking I’d stay for the next day and for the foreseeable future... I thought if I did that that, maybe something would change. I thought that I might be able to change myself, too.”

Back then—Ryuuji was trying to recall what Ami had been like during the past year’s summer. She had been just as spiteful and beautiful as she was now. She had been wicked on the inside, and he just hadn’t really gotten her as a person, and...

“I’m regretting that I ever thought that now.”

Then what was going on with her this whole entire time... Ryuuji couldn’t help but turn his eyes away from Ami’s beautiful face.

Ahmin sure has changed, he remembered Minori saying when they talked during the culture festival.

That was right—Ami and everything around her seemed livelier than usual since summer ended. She got in fights with Taiga whenever they were in contact or approached each other, to the point he couldn’t ever tell if they were getting along or not. Whenever they did that, though, it sent the class into laughter. Though they all praised Ami’s beauty, they had all also accepted her dark underbelly and bad mouth at some point. They humored her despite her personality—no, it was more like they’d whole-heartedly embraced it, making a huge commotion in the process.

Ami’s position in the class changed because she started showing her real personality to everyone. She stopped trying to hide, to make things up, or to dupe them, and leapt into their midst with her true feelings on display. Or so Ryuuji had thought, at least, but it seemed that after Ami took stock of

everything, she regretted the days they spent with each other.

“Are you saying that you regret everything you did with us up until today, like all the stuff you did with Kihara, Kashii, Kitamura and everyone...and with Taiga, Kushieda, and me?”

“I’m really grateful to Maya and Nanako, and everyone else. I never thought they would all be so friendly to me. There were a lot of things that happened in elementary, junior high, and my old high school, but this might have been the first time I actually made friends with anyone. Things went okay every once in a while at my old schools, but it was just okay. Actually, no one’s talked to me since I transferred here.”

“Is that really true?”

“You’re surprised?”

When Ami asked him that, he nodded. He had thought that someone as beautiful as Ami would end up becoming the heart of a group whether she wanted to or not, that she would be popular, and that she would end up the center of attention.

“How could someone who thought of school as just a place you’re confined to temporarily make friends? How could someone who thought she would forget everything after graduating, who just thought of this all as a fleeting moment and as fleeting relationships, make actual connections? How can you make friends when you think your real place is at work, that your real self is your model self, and that school was just something to put up with for years? Anyone could see through that, even a kid. But I stopped being that person here, and everyone accepted me... I was so happy about that. I had lots of fun, and I treasured that so much.”

“Then...why don’t you do that—treasure it?”

“It’s too late now. I made mistakes—tons of them.”

She caught him by surprise and took back her shoe. In a show of laziness, Ami bent down to put on her shoe while still sitting on the bench. Her long hair slipped down from her shoulders.

“There we go... I wonder how I can say this... I think you’ll think this is weird

when you hear it though. Um...I saw Tiger when she was hurt. I understood her feelings, and I decided if no one else would notice her, I'd be the one to save her... That's what it was—back then."

Ryuuji was speechless.

Kawashima Ami really might have seen everything.

"Back then, I didn't just see Tiger unravel, but a whole bunch of other things, too. It was like everything was going to pieces...right. I really wanted to do something about all of it. I wanted to fix all of it somehow and make sure I protected the place I belonged."

Ami pulled up her socks after putting on her shoes and stood up from the bench. She combed her hair down with her slender fingers and looked down on Ryuuji.

"On the other hand, I also got hurt, but I thought no one would notice. Why was it always me? Who's thinking about me? Like, who would notice that I existed?"

*Sorry—Ryuuji thought of saying in that moment. He wanted to say *What hurt you? Tell me, we'll go back and fix it*, but he couldn't, and even if he did, he knew that Ami wouldn't accept that. There was no way to go back and redo things, anyway.*

"I want to appreciate where I am now. I thought that was why I needed to think about that stuff, but it got bigger and bigger, and I didn't know whether I could hold it back, and I ended up panicking because of that, too. My mistakes started piling up, and I couldn't do anything about it... In the end, I figured it out."

I'm just an outsider. I'm in the way.

Even though everyone accepted me, I messed up, and that's what I ended up turning into.

"That's not true...obviously!" Ryuuji jumped up and practically yelled. "Who'd say something like that?! Don't mess around! You're the only one who thinks that! If someone actually said that, I'd never forgive them!"

For just a moment, Ami looked at Ryuuji after he yelled. She raised her eyebrows, and her face contorted as though she were going to cry. When the wind sliced between them, she sniffled instead.

“But...that’s just how it is.”

She regained her composure.

“Things were going fine without me, then I came in. I was like oh, I need to do something about that, and of course I need to do something about this. I stuck my nose into things thinking that I needed to fix everything. I did so many things I shouldn’t have, and because of that...I made a ton of things go wrong. You getting rejected by Minori-chan happened because of that, too. Minori-chan and I had that huge fight, and now we can’t go back to the way we used to be. Plus on top of that, because we got into a fight, Tiger...Tiger almost died. Things turned out like that, so right now I—”

As the words gently flowed from her lips, he could see them tremble.

“I was so, so, so lonely—just so alone. I felt so by myself, I couldn’t help it.”



You idiot, he wanted to say.

Ryuuji was so overcome by the rush of emotions coming to him, that his mouth couldn't keep up. His shoulders shook. What was he supposed to say first? How could he put the emotions he felt into words after Ami said that because of him?

"You..."

Somewhere in his head, he remembered how Taiga looked earlier. She was so lonely and regretted things she couldn't do anything about, and also—right, she looked almost as miserable as himself.

It wasn't just him and Taiga. Everyone looked the same. Everyone might have been in the same boat.

Something wouldn't go right, and it would happen without anyone knowing or attempting to find out.

"I can't believe you're throwing away everything you have and running away like that just because you made a mistake! You're refusing to look at anything and going on and on about how you're so lonely—what is that?! Don't you think the people you're leaving behind are going to be lonely, too?!"

He yelled at her in vain again, unable to understand her or get across to her. The pain they were directing at each other was vividly clear, though.

Everyone must have felt the same. Him, Ami, and Taiga. Noto and Haruta must have, too, and even Kitamura—Kitamura had been crouching down and frozen at one point, too, hadn't he? Even Minori, who was a forward-facing powerhouse, said she had been suffering alone because she'd been caught up in what-ifs. None of them had been able to reveal their pain and suffering to anyone else.

"In your eyes, who's supposed to be doing fine?! Everyone is thinking about things, doing tons of stuff they shouldn't be, making mistakes, feeling embarrassed, doing the wrong thing, and living! You can make mistakes, too! You can just be embarrassed and leave it at an 'Oops!' Why can't you do—"

"Do you even have the right to say that, Takasu-kun?!"

Ami's voice went high and cracked. She pushed him, and he pitifully staggered.

"Whenever I was lost or hurt, you never, ever noticed! You never noticed me!"

"How should I have known?! I had no idea! I'm not perfect either!"

Just how old and how mature did a person need to be before they could keep pathetic things like that from coming out of their mouth? Would he ever be able to come to an understanding with another person, sympathize with them, and actually tell them his feelings?

"Then don't say stuff you don't need to! You're just so...! I would have been better off never meeting you...!"

Would he ever be able to go through life without hurting someone he really cared about? Would he be able to go without getting hurt himself?

"I really should have left school back then!"

As Ami yelled at him with a shaking voice, she rubbed her tears away with the back of her hand and ran off. He thought of how he could stop her, but he didn't know what to do.

He stared as Ami left the park. Then Ryuuji also started moving. He left the park and started walking in the opposite direction Ami had run off to.

By the time he noticed the voicemails on his cell phone, he had already gotten more than ten missed calls.

Chapter 4

“Was the landlady awake~? What happened~?”

“I said don’t worry about it. She said she’d bring up super concentrated essence that’ll make your skin feel bouncy next time.”

Ryuuji, who had come back from the downstairs landlady’s home, responded to Yasuko as he quickly reordered the three people’s worth of scattered shoes at the entrance. Even his landlady, who normally would already be putting out her bedding at this hour, seemed to have been waiting to get word back from Ryuuji to make sure things were fine. He was glad he had some nice-looking mandarins that were good enough to give away as a gift.

He came into the apartment and peeked into Yasuko’s room. Yasuko saw her son’s face as he came back in and smiled. “Hee hee.” Her face was white, as though it had been bleached. The normal flushed color of her lips and eyes had been robbed from her.

“I really worried the landlady... I wonder what’s going on with the shop. I should call in...”

“No, you can’t!”

The one who stopped Yasuko from trying to get out of bed to reach her cell phone was none other than Taiga, still in her school uniform. “You need to stay in bed. Your blood pressure will drop again.” She held Yasuko’s shoulders down and pulled the blanket back up.

“I just called the shop, so you’re okay. I got the owner on the phone,” Ryuuji said.

Looking up at Ryuuji, who was still standing on the other side of the sliding door, Yasuko sighed, *Oh no*.

“He said you should just rest today. He said he’d call tomorrow at noon.”

“Did he say that this was why he shouldn’t hire older women~?”

“He didn’t.”

“Did he say that Mirano is an old hag and that he should have left things up to an energetic, youthful girl?”

“I said he didn’t say anything like that. Anyway, don’t worry about anything weird like that and just sleep. Even the doctor said that if you just take a break and sleep for a night that you’d feel fine after. I’ll get dinner ready, so if you feel like you can eat, you should.”

“Night, Ya-chan...”

Ryuuji watched Yasuko bury herself in the blankets as she heaved and sighed, then he turned off the room light. Taiga also stifled her footsteps as she got up and left the room, then slowly and quietly closed the sliding door.

It seemed that even Inko-chan had, in her own bird-like way, sensed that something was wrong from the living room. Bluish-green blood vessels were showing in her eyes, which were half-filmed over. Her legs were scaly (it was winter, so her skin was dry) as she hung upside down in her birdcage like a bat. “How’d it go?” she said in a creepily human-like voice, but Taiga stared at her and said, “Shh.” Inko-chan nodded and went silent. It wasn’t as though she understood human words, so the coincidence was alarming.

“Sorry... I’m really sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

Taiga brushed Ryuuji’s apologies aside and sat down on the edge of a floor cushion. It was facing the TV and to the right, which had previously been Taiga’s designated seat. She seemed a bit uncomfortable as she stretched out her legs and looked at the tips of her own toes.

She said she had seen Yasuko when she casually glanced into the Takasus’ window after she went home early. It seemed Yasuko had just come back from her lunch job, and Taiga waved a hand from her bedroom window as Yasuko came into the living room. Then, Taiga noticed Yasuko’s strangely blue face when she stood stock-still without replying. The next moment, she flopped right to the ground without even cushioning her fall.

Taiga left her condo right away and ran over to the Takasus’, realized she forgot her spare key at the condo and, according to her, went into a

“maddening panic,” and banged on the landlady’s door downstairs like a “rampaging taiko drum.” Luckily, the landlady was home and opened the door, and once they saw Yasuko pale and collapsed, called a doctor immediately.

While the doctor came to their home, Taiga nursed Yasuko, and the landlady tried to get hold of Ryuuji. At that time, Yasuko’s idiot son had been throwing his female classmate’s shoe, getting in a fight with her at the park, and making her cry.

“I wonder if Ya-chan will be okay... She will, right? They said it was just anemia.”

“She’d better be...”

“She looked better than before.”

“I think so, too.”

He had been panting and running as fast as he could. By the time he arrived at home, he felt like he might collapse, too. The landlady was waiting for him at the front doorway the whole time. Yasuko was in an even worse state, and her face was surpassingly pale. She looked green, and her mouth wasn’t moving right. A man and a woman he didn’t recognize were next to her, and they had their hands on Yasuko’s chest and arms. To Ryuuji, it looked as though she’d been caught by some villains and was being dissected. The people weren’t even wearing white and didn’t seem like doctors, and if Taiga wasn’t sitting there, he might have even screamed in his confusion.

Yasuko moved only her eyes as she noticed Ryuuji had come home and then moved only her lips as she apologized, *I’m sorry for ending up like this.*

She had too much to drink and went to bed at five in the morning. Then she woke up at eight and apparently went to her afternoon job without getting any food or rest while the alcohol was still in her system. It seemed that might have caused her anemia. Her already-low blood pressure was also a problem, and they were just lucky it hadn’t been something more serious. The doctor, in short, had said not to worry, to take iron supplements, to sleep, and to not drink too much.

As Ryuuji soothed his heart and listened to the doctor’s specific directions and

medical jargon, he thought he caught a whiff of a certain smell. It was a soft odor, like a mix between the light-brown, mushy, melted food made for the old and sick to eat and cleaning detergent. That slightly nauseating, warm air even followed them here, Ryuuji thought.

When Ryuuji was very small, long before he moved to this town, Yasuko was in the hospital for a long time. Ryuuji still didn't know what disease she had had, and his memories were vague because he had been too young. When he was surrounded by that smell, he immediately remembered the overwhelming odor that would wrap around his whole body whenever the automatic doors opened, and the emotions that would come with it when he saw the patchwork pattern on the roof of the daycare at the hospital he had been going to, and the duck and alligator wallpaper on the walls.

He remembered the book he had fully memorized, the dark part on the end of a blinking fluorescent lamp, the hair and dust that gathered at the corner of a hallway, the tanks lined up next to the restrooms along the wall that had some mystery use, the plastic name plates on them, the quiet stairs leading to the basement, and the iron door with the terrifying mark.

He didn't like the boredom, or the unfamiliar kids and adults, or being talked to. His heart would start to race oddly, and his throat would get hot, and he would feel like sobbing and wailing. During that time, Ryuuji had been an anxious, scared, quivering kid.

He was still about as useless now as he was then.

"What should I make for dinner... I guess we don't have anything... I guess I should go get something that Yasuko can eat today when she wakes up."

"Then I'll stay here and watch Ya-chan."

"It's okay. You've got to be tired, too, so you should go home. I'll bring something you can eat at your condo."

Yasuko had said that she was feeling queasy, so he thought about making an easy-to-digest gruel that might be good, or maybe soup. Maybe he would make soup with some noodles. He would give her a Pocari sports drink to hydrate her and her favorite pudding, popsicles, and almond jelly. If he got her a magazine, she might even read it the next day.

He'd do something like that.

He had enough wisdom to select those things, but there was something even more vital he really needed that his current self couldn't do. He had grown enough to have that wisdom, but he himself was the cause of this situation.

If Yasuko hadn't started a day job, this never would have happened. If she hadn't wanted Ryuuji go to college, this wouldn't have happened. If he hadn't said things the way he did before, this wouldn't have happened.

"I said I'm fine. More importantly, I'm worried about Ya-chan, too, so... Ryuuji?"

He held his head. For a moment, he couldn't remember what was going on and what he was trying to do. His mind went blank, and he was in a stupor...his wallet. Right, his wallet.

Ryuuji grabbed his wallet and stood up. He needed to go shopping for food. He slowly took a step and then started walking.

"Hey...are you okay? Wait."

He left the living room light on and lent an ear for a moment to the other side of the sliding door. He felt like he could hear Yasuko gently breathing in her sleep.

"Hey, Ryuuji."

"I'm going out for a bit."

He put on his slip-on sandals and left the front door. He went down the stairs and started walking.

The sky turned dark before he realized it. It was night.

The asphalt took on a glassy glitter under the circular light of the streetlamps. A woman with a small dog breathed white as she passed by Ryuuji's side. A salary man wearing a mask was talking in a loud voice as he overtook Ryuuji. He wasn't talking to himself but on a cell phone.

Haah—the white cloud Ryuuji breathed out stuck around for a while as it

went up above his face. When he moved his legs, he felt like he was following that breath.

That was why his eyes were clouded and he couldn't see well.

He didn't notice the incredibly loud footsteps following behind him, either.

"Hey, your coat?! You even forgot your keys and phone! And your eco bag!"

"Ah...huh?"

He staggered at the sudden impact from behind him. Taiga had run into him like she meant to jump onto his back. When he turned back around, she was breathing white like a runaway engine.

"Get back to your senses! You idiot!"

She thrust the down jacket that Ryuuji always wore at him. Then, for the first time, Ryuuji realized what he was wearing. He had taken off his school jacket and cardigan and was only wearing his school uniform's shirt and slacks. He had put sandals on his bare feet. When he looked down, he was more surprised by the absurdity of it all than the cold.

"Seriously! Here, hurry and put this on!"

Taiga practically threw the jacket at Ryuuji's chest. Then, she stuck out her hand at him. She was holding his usual eco bag, which she had probably thrown his cell phone and keys into. Taiga likely grabbed it as quickly as she could and was out of breath from running after him in the cold.

Then he noticed Taiga, whose nose was red.

"What's...with your feet?"

"Huh? What!"

She wasn't in a coat. She only wore her uniform with thick tights, and Yasuko's slip-on sandals. Taiga looked down at her skinny-looking legs.

"I messed up!" she wailed in a low voice.

"You wear it."

Ryuuji put the jacket he had just taken from Taiga's hands right on her shoulders, but Taiga wriggled as though she didn't want that.

“No! I’m fine! I’m going home, so you wear it!”

Her sandals *clip-clopped* as she jumped to the side and ran to the end of the road. *No, you wear it*, Ryuuji tried to say back, but he got caught on his words. He still had the jacket in his hand as he tried to get her to wear it, and then he stood stock-still as though he was spacing out.

He couldn’t get his voice to make a sound.

His throat was dry.

He was just dead tired from that day.

“Ryuuji...?”

He noticed Taiga looking up at him. Her hair moved with the sub-freezing northern wind, and she tilted her head ever so slightly as she opened her eyes wide and asked him how he was doing.

You wear this and go home first. I’ll make something for you for dinner. Thanks for bringing it, ’kay—he couldn’t even form those words with his mouth.

It was as though a lid sealed Ryuuji’s throat. He remained silent as he half-forcefully bundled Taiga in the jacket where she was standing along the wall. Then, without letting her say anything, he turned on his heel.

He had the eco bag in one hand as he walked through the town at night.

What would he buy? He looked at the time on his phone. It was still before eight. It was earlier than he thought. The supermarkets would still be open. He headed to the store-lined streets and looked down at his own toes, which were freezing. He could hear the *clip-clop* of slip-on sandals.

He knew that was Taiga without even turning around. Taiga had sneakily followed him.

She probably actually thought he hadn’t noticed her yet. When Ryuuji stopped at a crosswalk, Taiga hid herself behind an electric pole a short distance before the crossing. When the light turned green and he started walking, she waited a moment, and then he heard the *clip-clop* of her feet again.

I see right through you, just go home, he wanted to say, but the lid that

covered Ryuuji's throat was still holding back his heart. Ryuuji forged ahead, and Taiga acted like a spy. Like dunces, the two of them continued to walk through the town at night like neither of them noticed the other.

The reason why he couldn't say anything was probably because once he started talking, he didn't know what would come out. That was why he needed to keep his throat lidded.

You never bothered to notice me. Ryuuji wanted to repeat back the words Ami had yelled at him at the park during sunset. *In that case, how do you know how I'm feeling right now? It's not like you'd ever even try to find out.*

That was because he would never let her know.

It was hard. It hurt. He couldn't put that into words. Ryuuji didn't want anyone to know. He wouldn't tell anyone. He didn't want anyone to figure it out. If someone did figure it out, that someone who asked him about it would—

"Achoo!"

That certain someone who cared about him would try to do something about it.

He stopped and turned around. He switched directions and finally managed to tell her, "Go home." Taiga rubbed at her nose and opened her eyes wide, as though shocked. It seemed she really, genuinely thought he hadn't figured out she was following him.

"Go home, really."

"No!"

He repeated his words to her and pushed back at Taiga's shoulders as though trying to have her go back the way she came. Even though Taiga was small, she was heavy, like she was made of steel, and he couldn't push her back at all.

"No! You're acting weird!"

She narrowed her eyes as though menacing him. She said it vehemently and stubbornly.

"Just go home!"

“I said no! I won’t talk to you! I won’t walk with you! I’ll just go with you! What’s so wrong with that?! It’s what I want to do!”

He didn’t want her to open her mouth anymore.

“You’re a nuisance! There’s nothing you can do, so just go home!”

He was fed up with people working so hard they collapsed for the sake of his future. Whether it was anemia or a serious disease, he didn’t want to feel like this ever again.

He didn’t want anyone to ruin their body for his sake—no one, not again, not ever again. He didn’t want to make anyone do that.

“I’m not going home! I’m going with you!”

“I said to go home!”

“I’m staying here! Let me go, you balding pig! Don’t touch me!”

They were at the street before the line of stores when Ryuuji and Taiga started having a pointless pushing match. When Taiga resisted him, Ryuuji half-seriously hit her shoulders and desperately bit his lip. *You’re nosy, a nuisance, in the way, noisy, self-centered*—all kinds of complaints came springing into his head, but he didn’t say them out loud. He was close to letting an actual shout slip out of his throat.

What am I supposed to do if she dies?!

Like an idiot, exactly like a kid, Ryuuji had jumped to that hasty conclusion and was actually seriously feeling that fear. He was close to yelling, desperately keeping his mouth closed as he bit too hard on his lip and split it open.

Forever ago, an eon ago, an incredibly long time ago—he was terrified. “What’ll I do if my mom dies?” That thought had been the root of his fear.

They had walked while holding each other’s hands in the moonlight, faced each other as they read picture books at night, swung on the swings in the sun as he sat in her lap. He’d been taken in by the words she repeated over and over again, “It’s going to be okay.”

He’d believed that it would be okay, but suddenly, the time when the spell’s effect wore off had come. Terrifying thoughts circled in Ryuuji’s head again and

again and again.

“It’s fine. So just! Go home!”

“Ryuuji!”

He cut Taiga off and pushed her away. He ran away as fast as he could.

Like he was avoiding the light of the stores on the streets where people passed by, he ducked into a dark back path. He desperately escaped into the gaps between the dark houses he had seen from the school window, which looked like the crests of waves on the sea. He panted like a dog and swallowed back the whimper that would occasionally try to find its way out. No matter how he ran and ran, it felt as though the anxiety and fears of his childhood were following after him. If he kept like this, he would immediately be caught in its hands.

This probably wasn’t something he could run from.

Ryuuji’s world had been nothing but Yasuko for so long. Yasuko, too young to be a mother, had held him, and it was as though the two of them had been sent alone together on a safe boat into the sea in the middle of night. Ryuuji clung desperately to Yasuko, and their family traveled the endless waves. He thought letting go of her hand would mean the end. If the one and only person who would hold his hand disappeared, that would be the end of everything. He would be alone for eternity. He had been feared that for so long.

But Ryuuji slowly got bigger. He almost drowned several times but became more courageous at swimming through the waves each time. He felt letting go of Yasuko’s hand would be okay. He could swim by himself, eventually find a safe boat all on his own, and then pull Yasuko up with him.

That was what he thought.

Then his mother’s hand had reached out to him as though saying, “You can’t let go yet.”

“Takasu-kun, you’ve never rebelled against your mother until now, right?”

When that happened, he brushed aside Yasuko’s hand.

“Sit with me.” “Be a good boy now.” “Wait until I get home.” “Make sure you

study.” “Eat dinner with me.” “Don’t work.” It was the first time Ryuuji had rebelled against something Yasuko had told him. Deciding he wouldn’t go to college and would work was rebellion. He had done it because he wanted to brush away Yasuko’s hand in order to rebel.

He didn’t know which direction to head or where to go, but Ryuuji wanted to try swimming on his own. He wanted to win. He wanted to be superior. He knew that he was taking the “virtuous route.” Ryuuji wasn’t sacrificing college in order to work. He didn’t even know what his aspirations were, only that he was so afraid of finding them that he was using self-sacrifice as an escape. He also couldn’t deny that there was something appealing about the idea of sacrificing his own future as he ran away.

He’d known he was hurting Yasuko by doing that, but he still went through with it. He had gone over the head of his one and only mother. He wanted to become larger and stronger than his mother—strong enough that he would be fine even if she were taken from him.

Did he really have the strength to swim by himself? He didn’t know. It was precisely because he didn’t know that he wanted to try. But he’d endangered himself, and when the adults had offered him their hands, he’d pulled away. Yasuko hadn’t believed that he would be okay, and she’d tried to pull her son back as he left her in the waves. Then Ryuuji was caught again. He was caught by the anxieties and fears from his childhood.

However, this time his fear wasn’t of the cold sea that could steal his mother from him, but that his own faltering swimming would be the cause of his mother sacrificing herself and drowning.

It wasn’t just because of the cold that the fingers he put to his mouth were trembling.

“I-I caught youuuu!”

He felt something latch onto his elbow from behind, and he staggered. Taiga, who was still in sandals, and whom he hadn’t expected to follow him this far, took hold of him with a terrifying force. She spun him around with an intense momentum, and he wasn’t able to hold out as he stumbled.

“Ryuuji! Stop! I said stop!”

“My—”

“It’s fine, so just stop, you idiot! That was close! Didn’t you notice the car coming by you just now?!”

When he still tried to run, she ended up aiming a deadly kick at his behind. It didn’t hurt, but it made him collapse so he finally couldn’t run away.

“It’s all my fault... This is my fault, isn’t it?”

He crouched pitifully before an electrical pole. In his mind, he wailed, *Give me a break*. He didn’t want to show Taiga his face, so he desperately grasped at the electrical pole and buried his head in his arm.

“What’re you saying?!”

“Yasuko collapsed because of me. It’s my fault. I was wrong.”

“You...you feel like you’re to blame because she pushed herself too hard for you? But, but, um...you couldn’t do anything about it! It was anemia and her health. No matter how much you look after her, she’s human and she’ll get sick every once in a while! There’s nothing and no one to blame! Plus Ya-chan is your mom! No one can stop Ya-chan from doing stuff for you, right?!”

Taiga was breathing hard, and her voice seemed to vibrate desperately. She was saying that even though her own parents probably never did anything for her before. It was because she didn’t understand how a parent’s feelings could build up that she could so innocently just tell him to accept things as they were. When Taiga did that in front of him, Ryuuji felt even more cornered. He was being confronted with his absolute weakness and how spoiled he was.

“How would you know?” His voice grated and pitched up, and his lips trembled. “Yasuko ended up like that because of me. If I had gotten myself more together, she would have actually believed I could do it, and she would have relied on me more, and she wouldn’t have ended up like that.”

“I...I don’t...really get it...”

He felt her touch his shoulder slightly with her small hand, as she was unsure of what to do. Her hand was probably rising and falling near his back as she hesitated.

He tried to push away her hand. Just as he had brushed aside Yasuko's hand, he tried to ward off Taiga's, now.

"What am I supposed to do...?!"

"Ryuuji—"

They touched for just a moment.

Her warmth, her body heat transferred over to his frozen fingertips, but it was too intense. Even then, Taiga stayed next to him. His instincts told him that this was his final saving grace. Everything he was thinking about burned away in that moment.

Even though he had been trying to brush Taiga's hand aside, he ended up gripping it instinctively. In the ring of indifferent light from the streetlamp, Taiga's eyes opened wide.

She didn't breathe a word of complaint or tell him to let go. Instead of saying anything, she just concentrated her bottomless gaze on him. It felt as though she were roughly rummaging through the inside of Ryuuji's head with her giant eyes. She stepped towards him in that overbearing way that no one else could ever mimic. With a strength that was difficult to oppose, Taiga pushed her way in on him. It was as though she tore apart the expansive canopy of dark sky over the sea in his imagination, and her white face was looking through into Ryuuji's soul.

Through the torn hole, Taiga offered a hand to Ryuuji as he drifted on the waves.

Would he take it?

"What am I supposed to do?! Are parents supposed to push themselves until who knows what happens to them?! How can I get Yasuko to stop doing that for me?! Will she ever get how I'm feeling?!"

He grabbed Taiga's tiny hand.

"I—I just—"

It was so small that, if he wanted to, he could have broken it.

"I just hate it so much, but I can't do anything about it...!"

But he didn't want to hurt her.

He was insistent about that. He didn't want to cling to Taiga. He could grab on to her hand, cry and wail emotionally, and expose all the pain in his heart—but Ryuuji desperately brushed aside that temptation.

Because if he did that, he was sure Taiga would do something for him. Taiga was the kind of person who would do anything for him—for the person she loved. He couldn't have that. That wasn't okay.

He couldn't let her do something for him.

He couldn't let Taiga do anything.

He couldn't let her do something that would make her drown for his sake.

That was because Taiga was important to him. She was someone he could never lose. He had realized painfully clearly during the blizzard.

If she was important, then he needed to act like it and make sure she didn't do anything for him. That was why he couldn't show her his pain. He didn't want her to know what was in his heart.

He'd thought that finding connection was what fueled joy and helped people go on living. He hadn't thought there was such a thing as not wanting others to understand his feelings.

"I want to show Yasuko that I'm strong..."

Strong? Taiga asked him back and nodded solemnly. Ryuuji's mouth formed a line as he spoke with his trembling lips.

"I'm not a kid anymore. Even if Yasuko isn't helping me, I can swim through this world. That's why she doesn't need to strain herself for me anymore. All I can do is prove that to her. All I can do is thrust it in front of her eyes."

Like that, once again, he could only brush aside his mother's hand. This time, he wouldn't be a failure. He wouldn't sacrifice anyone, and he wouldn't have anyone drown for his sake.

He used all of his might to open both of his hands and let go of Taiga's. He righted himself back up again after having been so shaken, and he nodded slightly, *There*.

It was fine this way.

He had done it, hadn't he? Just like he imagined.

He held his breath and regathered his strength in his core. He looked down on Taiga's white face. Taiga was looking at the hand he let go. Her delicate and beautiful face, like a French doll's, was so perfectly composed that he couldn't tell what emotion was on it. The midwinter wind, which cut his skin like a blade of ice, flipped Taiga's soft bangs over. Ryuuji gently brushed away the strands of hair that stuck to her lips.

Quietly, Taiga looked up at Ryuuji, and in both her eyes, he saw quivering lights close to overflowing.

"Where are you going?"

"I've thought of something I need to do."

"You can't go."

He shook his head at Taiga's anxious voice.

"It's fine. I can go."

Ryuuji took a step forward.

Taiga kept following after him. Even if he told her to go home, she wasn't the type of person to ever listen to him.

The haberdasheries and stationery stores were, of course, already closed, but there were still residents on their way home, and the two supermarkets on the street were still open. The convenience store was spitting bright light onto the street, and the bookstores were still within operating hours. There were also several izakaya bars and a butcher shop, locally famous for its croquettes, that were open unexpectedly late.

Ryuuji's goal, however, wasn't the croquettes.

"So it really is closed..."

"You had something you needed to do here?"

Stopping, he stared at the closed shutters. The store name, *Alps*, was written

in old-fashioned, cursive script on a wooden sign. It looked like a western-styled confectionary store. There was a phone number under the store name.

He pulled out his phone and tried calling it. After it rang for a while, a message ran informing him that it was outside of their business hours and then went to voicemail. He felt a little flustered on the inside as he said, “I-I’m so sorry to call in the middle of the night. Um, I’m the son of Takasu Yasuko, the person you hired to work for you part-time recently. Well, there was something I needed to tell you...ah!”

Beep. The heartless sound of the machine flowed out of the phone and the voicemail cut off. He was just about to tell them his phone number. Ryuuji hesitated for a moment over whether to call again and felt a poke at his elbow.

“What’d you go ‘Ah!’ for? Was that their voicemail? They definitely heard the ‘Ah!’ Is this where Ya-chan is working part-time?”

It happened the moment that he tried to reply to Taiga.

Clatter clatter. The shutter opened by a few centimeters. From the still-lit-up interior of the shop, a middle-aged man in a cook’s coat bent over and peeked his head out. His eyes stopped on Ryuuji and Taiga.

“Are you the one who just called our voicemail? We could hear you from inside.”

“Oh, yes, that was me. Um...my name is Takasu. I’m your employee’s son.”

Her soooooon?! The man shouted with the usual reaction Ryuuji always got. The man pulled up the shutter and came out onto the street.

“I’m sorry for coming when you’re already closed. Um...it’s about my mom, but she recently got sick.”

“Huh, you mean Takasu-san? What happened? Is she okay?”

“She’s more or less fine, but—”

Taiga, who had been listening from the side lifted her eyebrows slightly. She probably knew what he was about to say.

“She started working even though she shouldn’t have for my sake, and though it’s very sudden, I have to ask that you let her go today.”

Whaaaaat?! With the same expression and voice as before, the man who was probably the store owner bent over backwards. Taiga also looked at Ryuuji from the side of her eyes.

Yes, he was acting on his own. Though Yasuko had informed Bishamon Heaven that she would be taking the day off, she probably intended to go back to this job like normal the next day. Though he knew it would cause trouble for the store, and he hadn't gotten permission from Yasuko, Ryuuji had decided to have this conversation about her resigning on his own. He was going to lie to Yasuko and tell her that the store said she didn't need to come in anymore.

He knew this wouldn't show her he was strong enough, but he wanted to do something to stop Yasuko from pushing herself too hard, even if it was by force. If he let her go on, Yasuko wouldn't stop to think about what she was doing to herself physically, and he knew she would just keep increasing the amount of work she was taking on.

"Whoa, I see... That's going to be a bit of a problem. We were really counting on her."

"I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble."

"We can't do anything about her being sick, but you think she can't come back at all? We could shorten her hours. Would that work?"

"Well, it's a little... I'm really sorry."

"See, the day after tomorrow is Valentine's. We're doing our usual hours tomorrow on top of planning to have a special sale on chocolates... What'll I do, hmm, we only have our artisans... She's sick, so she can't force herself, but... hmm."

Ryuuji shrank back apologetically.

"Could you do it?" The owner of the shop, who seemed to be in quite a bind, said something Ryuuji hadn't expected. "You're in high school, right? It's fine if it's after school. It's fine if you only come tomorrow and the next day, too. Please, I'm begging you. We just don't have enough hands."

No, I'm forbidden from working—Ryuuji start to turn the man down, but swallowed his words. Didn't he just decide that he wouldn't do everything

Yasuko said?

It wasn't as though he was rebelling against everything she told him. He was doing for his future—it might be one step forward to changing his existence in a significant way.

In order to brush aside his hesitation, he nodded before the store owner could change his mind.

“Then I will...tomorrow and the next day.”

Taiga looked up at Ryuuji's face like she was surprised. It was fine this way. This was how he would get Yasuko to stop working here. First, he would return everything to the status quo.

If he was honest with her, Yasuko would definitely be upset, so all he had to do was tell her there wasn't a job for her at the store anymore. The time might come when she'd find out about Ryuuji's part-time job, but at that moment, it was fine as long as she didn't find out immediately after she collapsed.

“Oh, thank goodness! Thanks so much, you're my savior!”

“It's nothing, I'll...”

“When can you come tomorrow?!”

The shop owner's hand stretched out to him. Ryuuji tried to answer the handshake by stretching out his own hand in return, but his hand slipped in vain through the empty air.

“Me?!”

The store owner had brazenly grasped Taiga's hand.

“This hasn't got anything to do with me?!”

“Aren't you his sister? Well, got that wrong!”

Ha ha ha ha ha, the old man's joke echoed emptily under the cold sky. “But we just have to have a girl do the selling. We don't have a uniform for men.”

“I can't work! Do you have any idea how much of a klutz...if I work, the skies will part and the earth will burn...!”

“You'd just be selling chocolates in boxes, so what's the worst that could

happen?! Just tell me when you can come tomorrow!”

Um, I-I-I... Ryuuji pointed a finger at himself, but the owner’s eyes were passionately focused on Taiga. Taiga was frantically shaking her head, but she glanced up at Ryuuji’s face.

“Then...then, I’ll come with him. We’ll do it together.”

“Hey! Wait! You don’t need to...”

The store owner scratched his chin as he nodded.

“Hm, then it’s settled, but I can only pay one person. Is that fine? I wonder what I’ll do for his uniform.”

“You can do whatever. I’ll just stick around, and he’ll be the one actually working.”

Taiga stood imposingly, looking smug in Ryuuji’s down jacket as she stuck out her chest and pointed at Ryuuji. *Stop, you don’t need to do that*, Ryuuji tried to say, but she spoke again in a low voice, “You’re the one working. Just hanging around here isn’t a big deal for me. There’s something strange going on with you anyway. That’s why I’m going to be monitoring you. Plus, just earlier you were telling me how much of a nuisance I am and stuff. You said I couldn’t do anything. I’m going to have you take that back. Then you can bow down to my greatness and kindness and crawl along the ground worshipping me like a god.”

And just like that, they closed the deal on the two-day, secret, part-time job.

“A job! You!”

Minori pointed at Taiga, looking at her with cold eyes.

“It’s not me so much as Ryuuji.”

Taiga’s finger pointed at Ryuuji’s nose. *You!* Minori turned her cold eyes on Ryuuji and nodded decisively.

“It’s for just today and tomorrow. I’m selling Valentine’s chocolates. Do you have any secrets on how to sell stuff? He said that if we sold a lot in the two days, we’d get a good bonus, too.”

“Secrets to selling, huh... Hmm, I guess just not to let it show on your face if something bad happens.”

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, Taiga listened to the advice as she pulled on Minori’s sports bag, as though entreating her.

“That’s heavy,” Minori said as she brushed Taiga’s hand away. “And when the manager’s eyes open, you get away as quick as you can.”

“That only applies to your ramen place, Minorin...”

Their classes were done for the day, and they had finished saying goodbye. The bachelorette (age 30) had called out Taiga during lunch, but it seemed the conversation hadn’t really been that fruitful. Taiga wasn’t in the mood to actually listen to a lecture.

Minori was comparing their faces happily.

“Putting the jokes aside, I think you don’t really have to worry if you’re just a salesclerk.”

There we go—the girl with outstanding reflexes lobbed her empty juice pack. Standing at the center of the classroom, she threw the pack right into the trash bin at the entrance.

“There, nice! You’re not doing kitchen work, so it seems like a great job, right? When it comes to selling Valentine’s day chocolates, today is the main event. If anyone’s going to give someone chocolates, they would buy them today. What’s the place you’re working at?”

“Ummm, what was it again?”

“Alps.”

At Ryuuji’s response, Minori’s voice pitched up. “Whoa.”

It seemed she was familiar with the store.

“I’ve been there before to buy their tarte Tatin! I see. You’re going to become part of that fancy background at the Alps, huh, Takasu-kun?”

“I know I don’t really fit in...”

“Ryuuji was supposed to be working by himself, but he’s so out of place that

the owner almost said no. He said he'd hire Ryuuji if I came, too. Ryuuji was so sad. That's why I'm going with him," Taiga explained with strange obstinacy.

"That sounds pretty nice?"

Minori put her sports bag back on and turned a smile like a budding flower to the wall clock. It seemed she needed to head to softball. Next, she pointed a finger right at Ryuuji's face.

"Okay! I'm going to be cheering you on, Takasu Ryuuji! Do your best on the first part-time job you've had in your life! Take the crimson impact!"

"Right... What's that supposed to be?"

Scarlet needle! Minori jokingly jabbed her fingers a few times, turned right on her heel, and then left the classroom ahead of them.

Yasuko healed right up after sleeping for a night. While she wasn't over-drinking, and she promised she would finish work before midnight, Ryuuji really wanted her to take a longer break. On the other hand, her regular customers would make sure she didn't push herself, and he'd do a better job of that than she would herself. She believed the lie he told her. "I have an exam the day after tomorrow, so today and tomorrow I'm going to study with Taiga and Kitamura and the others at a family restaurant."

There was one other lie. He told her that the night before, after Yasuko went to bed, there had been a call from Alps saying something to the effect that she didn't need to come back. Yasuko believed that lie more easily than he'd expected. She looked disappointed for a second, but then immediately lifted her head and laughed. "That happens sometimes. I'll find another good job. ☆"

For some reason, she rubbed Ryuuji's head like a child's. Even though he was the biggest mommy's boy under the skies, it was awkward.

The guilt from lying hit him heavier than he'd expected.

"There are two prices, okay? The bigger box is five hundred eighty yen, tax included. You press this yellow button on the register. The small one is three

hundred eighty yen with tax and you hit the blue button. You put the money you get inside and press the transaction button.”

Ka-ching. The register made a familiar sound as it opened and hit Taiga in the stomach, “Ngh.”

“You put the products in this plastic bag or in this paper one. Okay? Think you can do it?”

“Yes. I can do it. I think.”

Ryuuji was full of enthusiasm as he stood in front of the register. In order to practice, the owner said, “This please,” in a grossly high-pitched voice as he handed Ryuuji one of the big boxes and showed him one thousand yen. Without hesitating, Ryuuji pressed the yellow button, punched in 1000, and then hit transaction. The register popped open, and he grabbed the change the register indicated.

“Thank you very much!”

Grin!

“Uh! We’re definitely having Aisaka-san do that part!”

“Thank you very much!”

Responding to the owner’s call, Taiga turned around and broke out into a fake smile. *All I’m doing is saying that,* she said.

Yeah, good, the owner nodded. “Over here.” He pushed Taiga to stand right in front of Ryuuji, like he was trying to hide him, which was apparently “Perfect!” *What’s that supposed to mean?* Ryuuji thought.

After saying that, the owner went back into the store. Busy-looking people passed by Ryuuji and Taiga’s eyes. The wagon piled with pre-packaged chocolates had been put out under the eaves of the store, right into the cold December winds.

Under the midwinter sky, which was starting to darken, it was still a little too early for shopping on the store-lined street. There were some chatty private high school students from a school nearby walking around. “Oh, they’re selling chocolates!” “I guess tomorrow’s Valentine’s,” they were saying as they pointed

at the wagon, but they just passed through.

The owner had placed a stove at their feet, so they wouldn't be shivering from the cold.

"There's way more than I thought there would be, but...I'm pretty sure it'd be impossible to sell out of these."

As she stood right under the Valentine's Day ornament that hung from the eaves, Taiga stared at the wagon and cocked her head. A load of pristine chocolates was piled into the shape of a mountain. They had cardboard boxes full of more chocolates underneath, too.

"Actually, don't I look exactly like a scammer in this outfit?"

"Hmmm...exactly like one...yeah."

From a slight distance, Taiga looked at Ryuuji and knit her eyebrows together as though in a conundrum. The part-time uniform the owner had lent him was a pure-white cook's coat—it was one of those white outfits that pâtissiers wore in the kitchen. Selling chocolates while looking like this made it seem as though Ryuuji himself had made the chocolates at the store. But if anyone were to look at the price stickers stuck to the chocolates, it said in small lettering that the chocolates had come right from a production plant.

"Your outfit looks better."

"You think so? It looks okay? I wonder if it does. Could you take a picture for me?"

Taiga was in an aproned black velour dress. She pushed her cell phone at Ryuuji after she pulled it out of her pocket. Yasuko might have worn the same outfit, too. With her wavy hair in pigtails, Taiga really did look like a cute French doll.



“Take one for you? If we get caught, he’ll get angry. We’re in the middle of work.”

“I’m not working. I’m just hanging around. Here, take it.”

“Well, I’m working!”

“It’ll just be a second! This is all I want.”

Taiga fluffed up her dress a bit and struck a pose. Unable to do anything, Ryuuji hid the phone under the wagon and took a picture of her like that.

“Lemme see...”

He had thought Taiga would just check the picture, but she quickly turned the phone at Ryuuji. By the time he realized it, it had already made an idiotic noise, *bing-koo-ring*, and the shutter had gone off.

“Wow. This picture packs a punch. I got you making a really silly-looking face.”

“I’ll tell the guy to fire you.”

“Like I said, I’m not working.”

This girl... Ryuuji breathed out white breath and glared at Taiga for her juvenile attitude.

“Excuse me! Do you have smaller chocolates? Something with three pieces in it?”

A customer who seemed to be a local housewife started talking to them, sticking up three fingers. Ryuuji practically sprung up.

“Uh? Umm, we have the six-piece and twelve-piece ones...”

He answered indistinctly as though there were gravel in his mouth. Actually, he almost felt as though he hadn’t really answered her question.

“I see. Hmmm...milk chocolate.”

The person who talked to them looked at the chocolates for a bit and, in the end, seemed to lose interest. She put back the box she had in her hand and simply walked away.

“Ahhh. She left...”

“Whoa, I got pretty nervous. I just act too suspicious.”

“You have to be more like, ‘Welcome!’ Maybe that’s how you should say it?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

He nodded to Taiga, and tried to rearrange the boxes of chocolates so they were easier to see in their pile on the wagon.

“Oi, you proletariats!”

“Huh?! W-welcome... Wait, it’s you!”

He felt like falling onto the register. The one standing there with a carefree grin on his face was none other than the familiar, lovable idiot, Haruta. Ryuuji had told Haruta that he was starting work that day, but he hadn’t asked him to stop by.

“This isn’t fun and games! Go home already! Get back before you get hair on the merchandise!”

Taiga used both her hands to shoo Haruta away. Her fingers slapped him right in the nose, but Haruta didn’t even stop laughing.

“Don’t say that, Tiger. I came here to buy chocolates.”

“We don’t have chocolates for caterpillars like you! Now, get home!”

“I’m not the one buying. Right?”

Haruta turned behind him, and a girl smiled back at him. She looked to be a college student. No, that wasn’t the issue. *What?* Ryuuji opened his eyes wide. Taiga too. They exchanged looks for a moment with their mouths half-agape.

“Haruta-kun, do you want a big one or a small one?”

“This is the point in the story where if I say that I want the big one, I’ll be in trouble later, won’t I?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then the big one~! Whoo~!”

I’d like that one. The girl pointed at the larger box. Under a knit cap, her long, pretty hair grew past her chest. She wore a light grey coat on her thin frame.

“Th-That’ll be five hundred eighty yen...please...”

“Okay. I’m sure I had a five hundred yen coin...umm.”

She pulled a strangely wide wallet from her bag. As she tried to pull out change, receipts, hundred yen coins, and a gold turtle meant to bring good luck fell onto the ground. Haruta picked those up.

“Aw, you’re so messy. Here.”

He intimately put the items into the girl’s pocket. If they weren’t really close, Ryuuji couldn’t think Haruta would be able to do something like that. In other words, what that meant was—

“You...had a sister?”

They had to be related.

Ryuuji asked the question to confirm his suspicion as he handed over the receipt and her twenty-yen change. If they weren’t, then what were they? Taiga didn’t move a muscle. Apparently even her mouth no longer worked.

“She’s not my sister! Hee haw! She’s my girlfriend!”

The girl beside Haruta smiled.

It’s got to be a lie. I can’t believe it. No matter how Ryuuji tried to deny it, there was a special sense of closeness in the eyes of the girl who looked up slightly at Haruta’s face.

He stared intently at the pale hands that accepted the chocolates he handed over. She was a normal—or actually, a rather pretty—girl and older, wasn’t she?

“Th-th-th-thank you so much!” Taiga lowered her head, and Ryuuji also did the same in a fluster.

After they left, Haruta jogged back to Ryuuji alone.

“I like her. I wanted to show her off to you without hiding anything, Taka-chan,” he whispered into Ryuuji’s ear. He giggled as though embarrassed, smiled, and followed behind the girl who had gone off ahead. Since Ryuuji had shared his unrequited love troubles during the school trip, Haruta must have

decided to settle things with the girl he liked.

“How?! The world must be crazy...”

He couldn't help but agree with Taiga. No, Haruta was definitely a really great guy, and Ryuuji liked him (though that was gross to admit), but what kind of trick had that guy used to snag such a pretty girl like her? How did he even meet her in the first place?

“I can't accept it unless Haruta met her by like, passing by and helping her while she was drowning...! Damn it, welcome! We're selling Valentine's chocolates! Would you like some?! Welcome!”

Ryuuji was mostly jealous as he squeezed his voice out from the bottom of his gut. As though they had unexpectedly been ensnared by that, three people in a row bought chocolates. The third one even bought four boxes all at once.

Ryuuji cut and threw away the receipt that had grown long and unruly as he watched the customer take the scrap of paper and leave. He never thought his face was compatible with the service industry, but it seemed he was getting a pretty good start. The shock from Haruta disappeared from his head instantly, and his mouth loosened up.

“Hey,” said Taiga. “I was thinking about it, but I think it's better when you don't smile. How about you make that same face as earlier, like you were the captain of a pirate ghost ship?”

“S-since when did I look like the captain of a pirate ghost ship...?”

“I mean that face you made when you were looking jealous while you watched that idiot caterpillar walk away with his pretty girlfriend. Right, that face.”

“My face looks like this because you phrased that in a hurtful way...”

“Okay, and cross your arms. Close your mouth and stand up straight. Look sulky.”

He crossed his arms and silently stood behind the wagon just as she told him. Then, a pair of women who looked like they were coming from an office passed by.

“Oh, look. The pâtissier himself is selling chocolates...”

“Whoa, he looks so young but moody...”

“But you kind of feel like you can expect a lot out of up-and-coming workers like him and their chocolates.”

“Maybe I’ll buy some for my boyfriend.”

“I’ll buy some for myself.”

He didn’t know what they had associated him with, but as they approached, a passionate, continental melody came from their mouths, “Te te tееeelee rele rereleleelee.” He didn’t know what to do when they asked, “These are handmade, right?” He didn’t have the confidence in himself to lie.

Without realizing it, Ryuuji had turned into a stone guardian dog... No, he opened his eyes wide like the hellhound Cerberus itself as he watched the two approach. It wasn’t that he’d decided to curse them for stepping into his hellish domain. *I’ll sink you office ladies in a freezing bath of dirty blood and earth!*

The two saw his face, and though they were slightly frightened, they pointed at the chocolate boxes.

“I’d like a big one.”

“I’d like a small one.”

Ryuuji put the chocolates in a bag and handed them over. “Thank you very much,” he said in an intentionally low voice, and the two of them accepted it seeming satisfied. *We bought some!* They left.

“See. You sold some.”

“I really did... Actually, can I really do that? The box says wherever processing plant it comes from right on the bottom... Can’t they see...!”

“We’re not actually lying or anything.”

Ryuuji felt like karma would catch up with him eventually. Maybe the sale had just been a coincidence, because customers stopped coming over right after that. Though they were approaching dinner time, and the number of people moving through the streets had increased, those types of customers might not

have been the type to buy chocolates from the packed wagon.

“Takasuuu, Tigeeer, how’re you doing?”

Ryuuji looked up when someone called out to him. Noto, who appeared in his personal clothes with a grin on his face, contrarily made Ryuuji’s face strangely leaden and clouded over.

“I just ran into Haruta with his girlfriend over there...and he said you two were bored, so I came to window shop a little...ah ha...what’s with that...he has a girlfriend...a girlfriend!”

“Oh dear, oh my, seems we’ve come across a pitiful bespectacled boy.”

When she saw him all by himself, Taiga put her hands unpleasantly over her chest.

“That long-haired caterpillar and his gal were friendly enough to buy chocolates and to go on their merry way. Now that you’ve stopped here, you’re at least going to buy one box, right?”

“No way I’d ever do that! That’d be way too miserable! Takasu, did you have a clue?”

“Nope, I found out just now.”

“Right! Actually, what’s with that?! I can’t believe how much he’s accomplished right under my nose... Ahh, I hate this, ugh, what am I even doing... Has anyone else come by? Like the master?”

Ryuuji shook his head. Kitamura was probably still at the student council at school right around then, and Noto should have known that, too. *What could he actually want to know?*

“Umm, what about Ami-chan or Nanako-sama?”

At that moment, it clicked with Ryuuji. *Oh, maybe he’s doing it so I don’t realize how his heart is racing.*

“Kihara hasn’t been here.”

He tried to prod and casually draw out what was actually on his friend’s mind.

“Huh?! No, I don’t really care about her! It’s just I was thinking about

something! I was thinking Kihara was making a big deal about something again and maybe she'd try giving chocolates to the master or something! I was just like, what if that happened?! I don't really care though! I don't care, but like, doesn't it bother you Taiga?! That she might be doing something like that?!"

"What about that is supposed to bother me? Actually, why have you got to make a big deal out of it if Kihara Maya gives Kitamura-kun chocolates? Oh, I see. So you like Kihara."

Whoa. Ryuuji looked at Taiga from the side of his eye. He saw eye-opening cruelty, like someone taking a giant paintbrush and daubing over the delicate subtleties of the ever-changing heart without consideration. Poor Noto's face turned a fierce and terrible red.

It was certainly true that Noto's "support" of Taiga was probably an annoyance to her. He'd gone along with the mood and teased her, which was probably why she was attacking him now. Nothing less could be expected of the Palmtop Tiger. She was especially sensitive to the smell of blood coming from the wounded.

"While you were fighting, you realized that you liked her...so that's what this is. Hmmmmmm. You know what—it looks like that friendly hairy idiot did just fine for himself. So why don't you get your glasses dirty and put some elbow grease into it, too? I think you two would look pretty great together. How should I know, though?"

"Whaaat?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?! If you don't have any idea what you're talking about, then maybe you should keep your mouth shut! You're strange, Tiger! There's something wrong with you!"

"Oh, now you're all flustered. Looks like I hit the bullseye. Your face is all red."

"Actually, seriously stop! Don't say weird things!"

"It's not in the least bit weird. It's a very natural thing to happen. A guy's stamen and a girl's pistil—"

"You idiot! There's something wrong with your head! Whoa!"

"Now then, Kihara Maya is going to be in the same class as you tomorrow and the day after. I hope you're painfully aware of the weird sense of distance

between the two of you every day. I hope you worry about it! And suffer!”

You were just as miserable from your own love issues; I can't believe you'd do this to someone else, Ryuuji thought.

“So, why's your face red, too?”

“Huh?! R-Red?! Am I red...?!”

Wasn't he the person Taiga liked? Wasn't he the one who was worried and suffering? When Ryuuji thought about it again, he felt shaken for some reason.

“Th-th-th-that's enough! Damn it! Mister! They're not actually working!”

At Noto's roar, the owner inside the shop raised his head, looking concerned. *We're working hard!* Ryuuji shook his head and, in that opening, Noto ran away.

The shop owner probably hadn't taken Noto seriously, but he came out to the front, and his face clouded when he saw how many chocolates were still left on the wagon.

“It's almost six. Having this many left by now is bad. I know that you can't help having school friends come by, since you're selling outside, but if that's going to happen, at least call over friends who will buy more.”

Ryuuji and Taiga awkwardly exchanged looks. Of course, if this was all they could sell, the profits would be eaten up simply by their own wages.

“Well...even though I'm just hanging out here, I feel some responsibility over this. In that case, it's time to call in the lethal weapon.”

As though Taiga had thought of something, she opened her cell phone and started calling someone from her address book.

“Geh. You weren't alone?”

Ami glared at Ryuuji, who was still trying to stand haughtily like a fake pâtissier.

“I'm going home.”

She turned around.

She was out of her uniform, in casual clothes consisting of a down jacket, jeans, and a cap with fake glasses. Ami's disguise was to no avail, as some passing boys turned to her, saying, "That girl's cute."

"I wonder if she's a model? She's tall, too."

Her thin frame and the smooth, beautiful hair that spilled from her cap made it obvious she wasn't just any normal person.

"Well, you did come all the way here. Here, Dimhuahua, take this."

Taiga brought up her hand from below the wagon and extended her arm out to Ami, whom she had called. After looking around carefully, she handed Ami five chocolates in a stack.

"Huh? No way. I don't want you doing anything weird to me. I'm so beautiful, I stand out more than I want as it is."

"Okay, okay, yeah, you're so beautiful, Dimhuahua. You stand out so much. That's why I called you here. Now, take this and then say in a really loud voice, 'I love this place's chocolates!'"

"What? Are you telling me to be a plant?!"

"Well, more or less."

"No way! Why would I do something lame like that?! Actually, what's this guy doing here... This isn't funny!"

"Yo..." Though it was a bit awkward, Ryuuji tried raising his hand to her slightly. "How've you been?"

So, she hasn't left school yet.

Ami's response was just her clicking her tongue and then, "Disappear."

Ryuuji resigned himself to her cold act. The way he was acting might have been similar to the believers of the ramen shop who lusted after the boiling hot droplets. He might have been fulfilling his masochistic wishes for the stamp of submission, like a bottomless pot of insatiable greed. Ryuuji was the type of masochistic dog who felt an illogical need to respond to the beautiful girl's coldness and to end up passionately burning with emotion in contrast...not.

He wasn't just going to conveniently disappear from Ami's sight. He wouldn't let Ami manipulate him and get rid of him because he had made a mistake. Unexpectedly, even Ryuuji had complex, unmanageable emotions about that. He felt stubborn and competitive about her acting as though she was the only one who understood things.

He didn't know what would happen next, and he didn't want her to think of him as a failure who had given up. Basically, he might just want to be *praised* by Kawashima Ami.

Taiga cocked her head curiously as she compared Ryuuji and Ami's faces. A strange, disquieting air lingered between them.

"I had no idea you didn't get along to that extent, Dimhuahua and Ryuuji. Are you being so unfair to Ryuuji now because I told you not to be so friendly with him before the school trip?"

"No! Way! We just don't get along. We've broken ties, as you can see."

Hmph. Ami looked away and turned her back to the wagon as though she were going home, but Taiga grabbed the elbow of Ami's jacket.

"Well, Dimhuahua, don't talk about breaking ties. Just be nice already and buy some chocolates, and you can give them to Ryuuji to make up. Valentine's Day came just in time. It's perfect for you."

"What did you say?! Actually, what?! You're making me buy chocolates?! Aren't you just having me be a plant?!"

"Then it'll be my treat. Oh, but only one! And, right, you buy one for yourself, too. Then, you give that to Minorin and make up with her. I've been keeping an eye on you... You want to make up with Minorin, but you can't because of your weirdly flip-flopping Chihuahua heart... If it's too awkward for you, I can call Minorin over? Ha ha, I can't believe I'd be the one to create an opportunity for you to be honest when you're so damn impudent, Dimhuahua. No one can predict how a person will turn out."

"Hmph!"

Speechless, Ami silently took off her gloves and slapped Taiga with them. If they had been medieval nobles, that would have been a call for a duel. It wasn't

as though Ryuuji didn't understand why Ami would want to do that after her inner, complex feelings had been found out. But he was scared, so he didn't butt in.

"Ow! Ow! Dimhuahua! Stop, I'll release the impressions DVD to the public!"

"Who cares?! Do whatever you want!"

"Then I'll break you down mentally! Take this!"

Taiga opened up her flip phone.

"Huh? This is...bwah!"

Taiga showed Ami the screen. Ami fell down, dropped her cap, took a glance at Ryuuji, and once again blurted out, "Bwah ha!" It was probably the picture Taiga had just taken earlier.

"Right... Let me see that for a second. What did it end up looking like?"

"You shouldn't look. I think you wouldn't be able to recover."

"Let me see! In that case, delete it!"

"Like I could delete this when it's so funny."

Forgetting he was at work, Ryuuji ended up scuffling for the phone with Taiga. They stretched their arms out at each other as though they were playing one-on-one basketball.

"Oh! It's Kawashima Ami-chan!" said a lone girl, who looked to be a junior high schooler, as she walked by the shop. She was probably on the way home from a nearby school after her club activities. Quite a few girls around the same age started appearing one after another.

"Apparently she really does live around here!"

"What, who?!"

"The model! She's so pretty! Can I get your picture?!"

In a split second, a group of girls pulled out their cell phones and started making a scene. *Shake my hand!* they said. *Which school do you go to?!*

"Kawashima, you really are famous..."

Ami politely declined the pictures. “What? You did a great job recognizing me. ♥ Thanks so much for supporting me everyone. ♥” She went into her moist-eyed Chihuahua mode, shook their hands, and gave them autographs. The adults who passed by were watching the uproar quizzically, having no idea who Ami was and.

“Actually, are you buying chocolates from this place?!”

“Ami-chan is buying them! She even has five boxes!”

The chocolates that Taiga had pressed on Ami were completely obvious and still openly visible in her hands. Instantly, the girls closed in on the wagon and started pulling out their wallets.

“I’ll buy them, too! I want to be like Ami-chan!”

“Me, too, me, too! Geh, they’re expensive! But I’ll buy some anyway!”

The housewives among the passersby, who were part of a generation that wouldn’t know who Ami was, also started to glance at the wagon as they heard the girls making a commotion asking for boxes small and large.

Of course, even though they didn’t sell out, they sold much more than their day’s quota. Before they went home, Taiga bought four small boxes, and the chocolate mountain became much smaller.

“I’ve been thinking of doing Valentine’s thank-you gifts for a while. I wanted to send some nice chocolates from the department store basement by mail, but now that this happened, I guess this will do.”

“Thank-you gifts? For what?”

Ryuuji and Taiga were on the way home, walking side-by-side together a slight distance apart.

“For Kitamura-kun, Minorin, and you. It’s a thank you for saving my life. They’re pretty shabby, but...I’ll at least give some to Dimhuahua, too. She did end up helping us. I told her one would be on me, but I forgot to give it to her—so, four boxes. I’ll give them out at school tomorrow. You think it’d be too weird to leave them in this packaging?”

“You’re giving some to me? That’s a little weird...for me at least. We’re going to be selling those tomorrow, too, you know.”

“Maybe I’ll do something about the packaging tonight.”

“Just melt them. Just remake them and say that they were handmade. That’s all you need to do to package them.”

They rounded their backs to the cold and stuck their hands in their pockets as they walked their usual route home. A cold wind came from nowhere, chilling them to the marrow. The backs of their throats felt like they were freezing over.

“You know what—” Taiga looked at her toes as she muttered. “Time just flew by. I felt like time wasn’t moving at all at first, but when we started selling, it went by really fast.”

“I felt like that, too.”

Ryuuji also faced down and pulled his scarf up to his mouth. He warmed himself slightly with his own breath.

“I got tired, but it was a lot better than I expected—the work, that is.”

“Yeah, it really was, though I didn’t do anything.”

“You taped stuff, didn’t you?”

He actually felt regretful at the thought that the job would be done after the next day. He wanted to keep doing a lot more, Ryuuji thought. Actually moving around like this made him feel like he could start seeing a path forward. He felt like his helpless impatience and anxiety had gotten hazier as he worked that day.

“About yesterday... I’m sorry I said that you were a nuisance.” He had been able to start working because Taiga was there. “Thanks. If I were alone, I would have made up excuses and never been able to work. I think.”

“What’re you talking about? Don’t thank me for something like that. I’m the one who needs to be thanking you.”

“You’re being nice for once. In that case, make sure you do something with those chocolates. If you look up a recipe online, I think you’ll find something that can tell you what to do.”

Ryuuji smiled like she'd made a joke, but Taiga turned to him slightly, and she pouted, "Actually... If I give you chocolates, Ryuuji, would you be happy?"

"Huh?"

Ryuuji looked back at Taiga. As though she understood his confusion, she added, "Because I have no clue."

"You have no clue about what?" Ryuuji was the one to pout this time. "What kind of brute do you think I am if I wouldn't be happy getting chocolates as a thank you from you... You really don't know?"

"I got it... Then...then, I'll work really hard. I'll try to make them a little better." Taiga swung the plastic bag in her hand and nodded as she stared at the four boxes of chocolate.

When she said "then," it was like she was saying she was working hard in order to make me happy.

Taiga was working hard because it would make him happy—because she liked him.

Ryuuji looked at her stubborn face and stopped walking.

Taiga had said that even if she tried her best, it would amount to nothing. She'd tried her best and just ended up falling down a cliff, she'd said. That she would still do her best for him meant that she was prepared to fall down that cliff if necessary.

In that case—he wanted to grab Taiga's hand as she fell. He wanted to pull her back up and save her. What could he do if that was how he felt?

Suddenly, Ryuuji felt like the ground at his feet was collapsing.

He'd thought that if he hadn't found out how she felt, nothing would have changed. That if he could just forget what had happened, things would go back to the way they were.

But that was wrong, wasn't it?

Taiga was still falling down the cliff. She was still being hurt, and despite that, she hadn't called out for help. He would lose her. She would leave Ryuuji on top of the hill in the blizzard and fall, silently, until she could eventually walk out on

her own.

Taiga kept walking, not noticing Ryuuji standing stock-still under the midwinter night sky. Her back, bathed in the bright white of the streetlights, moved farther and farther away. Her long hair moved with the sound of her footsteps. In that moment, she might really have been unreachable. She was going off alone. That was the direction Taiga had decided to take.

Then what about me?

Taiga had made a mistake.

She let Ryuuji hear her voice.

If something started stirring because of that mistake, then who would take responsibility for it? Was it okay for him to forget about it? But...

But, but, but, but—he couldn't.

He couldn't just watch as Taiga went off on her own. He couldn't do anything now that his feelings had been stirred. And even if he *could* forget about it and pretend it never happened, he didn't *want* to do that anymore. He didn't want to turn a blind eye ever again when Taiga was hurting.

He wanted to save Taiga.

Just like Taiga, he had swallowed back his cry for help. He had wanted to cling to her, and still, he had desperately let go of her hand, because the journey Ryuuji needed to take was his alone.

But when it came to Taiga—when he thought about how Taiga would be at a standstill, hurt, and continuing to try her best, he realized her journey was toward him. Ryuuji wanted to help Taiga as she fell. He wanted to run out into the blizzard and grab Taiga's hand as many times as he needed to. To make sure Taiga wouldn't be hurt anymore, to make sure she didn't fall down anymore, he didn't want to let go of her hand ever again. He didn't want to be left alone again.

He wanted Taiga to know that.

Finally noticing that Ryuuji wasn't following after her, as she held her hair back from the wind, Taiga stopped and turned around. The hem of her white

angora coat turned up, and the frills on her long skirt fluttered. Her eyes twinkled brightly. Her light-peach lips moved, and he heard her voice as she said something—*Ryuuji! What do you think you're doing? I thought you were with me, so I was talking all by myself!*

That was Aisaka Taiga.

She was in the same class as him. They were coincidentally neighbors. People called her the Palmtop Tiger. She was stubborn, tyrannical, arrogant, a rich mademoiselle, an abandoned child, a klutz, careless, rough, but delicate. She was easy to break and had to be carefully handled. She was as lonely as an aimless paper airplane.

That was Aisaka Taiga.

“Taiga...”

I want to help you, Ryuuji thought.

He wanted to give her something that would make her glow with happiness. No matter what form it took, no matter what it was, he just earnestly wanted to give her happiness with his very own hands.

That was why he didn't want to pretend that he hadn't heard her. He couldn't forget it. Ryuuji wanted to always hear Taiga's voice. Her *true* voice.

But Taiga wouldn't understand that. Taiga wouldn't understand Ryuuji's feelings.

Taiga was going off alone. She was holding her tongue and leaving Ryuuji behind.

Chapter 5

After school on Valentine's Day, Taiga called everyone out to a deserted classroom, which was a derelict meeting room in the old school building. That morning, Taiga had made a point to go to school earlier than Minori and put letters in all their shoe cubbies to summon them, like she was following some old school tradition.

Ryuuji, Minori, and Kitamura opened the classroom door, pulling an unwilling Ami in with them by both arms.

"Heh heh heh. Here we meet again."

Taiga closed the door and let out a wicked laugh. She was probably too embarrassed to just straightforwardly thank her classmates.

"You call this a meeting? I just want you to know that I was dragged out here!"

"Dimhuahua, don't worry about the details! Kitamura-kun has to get to the student council, Minori has softball, and Ryuuji and I have important work, so we've got to make sure this all goes smoothly."

"Important work? You mean what you were doing yesterday?"

Hmph! Ami grumpily crossed her arms and stood by herself in a corner of the classroom. Minori smiled at her, her expression saying *Come on, why not?* Ami ignored her, and similarly turned her back on Kitamura, her childhood friend, when he tried to approach her.

Taiga paid no mind to Ami as she went on.

"We've been in a gloomy mood as of late," she said, "but today is Valentine's Day. To show my appreciation for you all, I brought some homemade chocolates!"

She carefully pulled out four wrapped packages from the paper bag she brought with her.

"They're homemade?! And you made them, Taiga?! That's amazing!"

Minori applauded and patted Taiga's head. Taiga puffed up her chest proudly. From beside Minori, Kitamura, who was once the victim of Taiga's fried egg illusion, also clapped his hands together where he sat.

"I can't believe that Aisaka made us chocolates...wow! It'd be a waste to eat them!" Kitamura seemed happy as he spoke.

"Those are just the chocolates you were selling yesterday. So you're finally just a liar now..."

"Nuh-uh! I just reused the wrapping paper because it was pretty, but I actually melted them down and put them in a mold myself! Well, it wasn't really a mold so much as the bottom of a bowl, but they're really nice looking and round! Look at the bags under my eyes! It took me all night!"

Taiga pointed underneath her own eyes for Ami. Ryuuji knew that it had actually taken her until five in the morning. He hadn't slept all night, either, watching the light streaming from Taiga's window.

"You probably just got help from Takasu-kun anyway."

"No, I didn't! I'm giving chocolates to Ryuuji, as well."

"But Takasu-kun has bags under his eyes, too."

"This is just how I look..."

That was a lie.

Ryuuji sat down in a chair next to Kitamura. Dust had clearly built up on the chair's surface and even its legs, but he didn't wipe it down. As Taiga triumphantly put the bag of chocolates on the desk, all smiles, Ryuuji watched her face weakly. He watched the face of the person who had decided unhesitatingly to choose the road where she would get hurt, and decided to remain steadfastly silent.

He realized long ago that there were things in the world that he couldn't do anything about. He knew that trying to change someone else's feelings was a prime example of one of those things.

"First of all, here! I'm giving these to you, Dimhuahua! Thanks for yesterday!"

"I'm not getting involved anymore, you got that?" Ami took the chocolates

and frowned sullenly.

“Next up, Minorin! I heard you came to my rescue during the school trip. You saved my life, so thank you!”

“Whatcha being so formal about? Of course I’d do that for you. I’ll always come runnin’ if you’re ever in trouble, Taiga.”

“Yeah! I love you, Minorin!”

“I love you, too! Whoa, Taiga~!”

Whomp! Whomp! Taiga and Minori brought their arms together, solidifying their friendship. Then Taiga continued, “Ryuuji! You, too! Thank you! I searched online and found out the right way to melt them! Make sure you eat these with Ya-chan, okay?”

“Right...”

Ryuuji took the chocolates. He wanted to look happy for her, but instead, he pretended to scratch his nose even though it wasn’t itchy, trying to hide his face as much as he could.

“And now, Kitamura-kun! I’m giving the biggest chocolate to you.”

“Ooh...! This really is heavy! I’m happy, but are you sure you want to give me the biggest one?”

“I do! You didn’t even think about how dangerous it was when you pulled me up the cliff! I heard it all from Ryuuji! Aah, jeez, it’s so embarrassing! I really am an idiot, aren’t I? What did I look like when I was buried in the snow?! Did you see my eyes rolling back into my head or something?!”

Even though she always became more talkative to cover up her own embarrassment, Minori exclaimed quietly, “Huh?”

She turned around and looked Ryuuji in the eyes. Kitamura must have heard her, too. The smile he had turned to Taiga froze, and his eyes wandered away. He was trying to avoid Minori’s unexpected gaze.

I messed up.

Ryuuji had asked Kitamura to join in his lie, but Minori...she had seen

everything.

Taiga might not have been able to help her embarrassment at remembering the accident. She was poking her tongue out slightly, eyes shut, and slapping her own cheeks in a poor attempt to hide her discomfort.

“Ugh, I can’t stand it anymore. I really can’t believe it. I was so worried about what would happen back then. My leg just whooshed right into the snow, and then I just started tumbling down and hit my head, and then everything in front of my eyes just went white... I guess that must be what it feels like to pass out. It felt like I was in a dream. I thought I’d spouted gibberish during it, so when I got back to my senses I started panicking! I really didn’t know what was going on for a while.”

Ryuuji held his breath and lifted his face. He looked desperately into Minori’s eyes.

Please don’t say anything. Just let the conversation move on. He would have happily sold his soul to the grim reaper or a demon lord if it could make his telepathic message get through to her, but Minori didn’t return Ryuuji’s gaze. She just looked at Taiga’s now red face.

“What kind of gibberish do you think you said?”

“Huh?! Like I could tell anyone! I can’t tell anyone! I can’t even tell you, Minorin! It’s something I can’t ever tell anyone! Just don’t ask me about it!”

“Just tell us.”

“No! I can’t! It was just me deluding myself and—”

“Spill.”

With a strange persistence, Minori grabbed and pulled on Taiga’s wrist. Taiga tried to keep a fake smile on her face, but she seemed shaken.

“I can’t tell you either, Minorin! It’s something that no one can ask about! It’s something I can’t tell anyone, even if they ask.”

As though she thought she could still believably pass off the entire thing as a joke, Taiga tossed her head with an exaggerated movement.

“If anyone found out, I’d be ruined. It’s something I couldn’t live with! It’s

something just that dangerous! Just kidding! Ha ha ha...you didn't hear anything, right?!"

Kitamura also seemed to have become flustered. He put on a fake smile like Taiga's and put a hand on Ryuuji's shoulder as though asking for his friend's agreement. Ryuuji nodded profoundly without thinking. "No one heard anything, you're fine!"

Absolutely no one had heard Taiga mumble that she liked Ryuuji, absolutely no one at—

"Uh..."

At that moment, Minori's eyes settled on Ryuuji with a dreadful intensity.

She brought her face close to his, almost as though she were trying to kiss him. Her eyelashes were close enough to touch him. He was so surprised that he stopped breathing as her lips approached Ryuuji's until they were just millimeters apart.

"Liar."

She was still holding Taiga's wrist in her right hand. She made a fist with her left.

"You're going to let her keep believing you didn't hear anything?"

She hit Ryuuji's chest, aiming for his heart. *Oof*. It knocked the breath out of him.

"*That's* the thing you couldn't forget, isn't it?"

"What..."

Taiga whimpered in a low voice, as though she had been left for dead. Her peach-colored lips half-open, she stared at Minori like she'd forgotten how to blink. *Huh?* Ryuuji felt almost like the scene was happening to someone else as he watched a terrific red color rise from Taiga's neck to her chin, from her chin to her earlobes, and then her earlobes to her cheeks. Her skin, which was normally white as frosted glass, instantaneously flushed a rosy red. Her perfectly round, large eyes were wide open, and they radiated a terrific light in a way like he had never seen before—like a star going supernova.

It was in that moment that their eyes met.

It was as though Taiga's soul left her body along with the carbon dioxide escaping her nose and mouth. She jumped away like a tiger caught in a trap. She wiggled away from them.

"You're gooooooooooinnnnnng noooooowheeeeeereeeeeeeeeee!"

Though she was being half-dragged with Taiga, Minori wouldn't let go of Taiga's hand. They bumped into each other and knocked over a desk. Even the chair Minori had been sitting in got knocked over. Taiga whipped around the hand Minori was still holding in an attempt to escape, and Minori braced herself to endure it.

"Taiga...! Are you sure you just want to pretend like he didn't hear anything?!"

"Le—"

Ryuuji froze with his eyes wide open.

"Takasu-kun is the one who saved you...! But then something happened, and he couldn't tell you! That happened because of you!"

"Let! Me—"

Ryuuji looked back at Kitamura.

He shook his head.

This isn't what I want.

He actually did want to know what Taiga's feelings were. He wanted to tell Taiga how he felt.

"Why Taiga! Why can't you just be honest with yourself and say it...why can't you just say it?!"

"—GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Whether it was because her hand was slippery with sweat, or because she was stronger than Minori, Taiga got her wrist free of Minori's grip. She fell over onto the floor, but then used the momentum to make a break for it, like a bullet. She crossed the classroom in two bounds and tried to open the door she'd previously closed.

“Ugh!”

Taiga looked up at Kitamura, who had made it to the door ahead of her to block her path. Reacting with the reflexes of a wild animal, she headed for escape through another door.

“Dimhuahua—”

Her yell was desperate. Ami was standing right in the way of the other door.

“Ugh, you’ve got the worst look on your face.” She snorted down her nose at Taiga.

Minori stood in front of Taiga, who had nowhere to go, and grabbed her shoulders.

“Look, Taiga! Look at me!”

“No! No no no no nooooooooooooo!”

“Who do you think I am?! I’m Minori! I’m your best friend, aren’t I?! You said you loved me, right?! In that case, believe me! Believe in my choice!”

Like an exploding bomb, Taiga flailed her hands around and continued to rampage.

“I believe in you, Taiga! I’m believing in you and that you’re not the type of person who would use me as an excuse in order to keep yourself from getting what you want! Or are you?! Are you actually that kind of person?!”

“Th-that’s not how it is!” Though she finally responded to human language, Taiga’s voice went high like a screech and cracked. “I was just doing it so you’d be happy! I care about you so much that I wanted you to be happ—”

“Cuuuuuuut the crap!” Minori shouted. “Don’t underestimate me! I’m going to secure my happiness for myself, with my own hands—with these two hands! I’m not gonna let annnnnyone else decide what makes me happy!”

Taiga pushed Minori’s arm away and ran past her, overturning the desks she came across as she did. Minori clambered up onto a desk, seeming to lose her patience.

“Damn it, now you’ve done it!”

Fwoosh! Like a hawk, Minori leapt from the top of the desk and swooped down on Taiga.

“Aaaaaaaaah?!”

...Or, at least, that had been her plan. Uncharacteristically for her, she flubbed the landing and fell flat on her face, just like her friend normally would have.

Whoa, you're an idiot... Ami muttered.

Taiga made another dash for the door. For a brief moment, she hesitated between the one Kitamura was guarding and the one that Ami was at.

“Looks like this is how it is...” Kitamura said.

“Guess we don't have any other options,” Ami said.

The two childhood friends moved in sync, as though they were actually siblings, to step away from the doors. They exchanged glances as they stood next to the wall.

“Looks like this is all we can do.”

“Right, right.”

They nodded to each other.

Taiga went through the door Ami had left open and ran out into the hallway. Minori was the first one to yell.

“Aaaaaaaaahmin?! You traitor!”

Next, Ryuuji stood up.

“Kitamura...!”

As Taiga's footsteps quickly grew distant, and Minori and Ryuuji exchanged glances. Ami's sickly-sweet voice shamelessly rang out to them, “Looks like someone's got to go after her—that is, if there's someone who wants to.”

He could go after her—and then what?

Ryuuji took in a breath. He stared at the chocolate Taiga had left behind on a desk. He snatched it up and tried to stick it into his pocket, but it wouldn't fit. In desperation, he shoved it into the front waistband of his pants.

What was he going to do by chasing after her? What was he going to do after finding out Taiga's feelings? What was he going to do after he reached out a hand to save her and they grabbed each other's hands?

"Takasu-kun, I'll go after Taiga," said Minori. "We still haven't finished talking. What will you do?"

What will I do?

"I'll—"

He looked at Minori. There wasn't anything to think about.

"No matter what happens, I don't want to leave Taiga. So..."

How would he tell her that? All he knew was that he didn't have even a bit of hesitation anymore.

He wouldn't let her go. Like he'd let her. He wouldn't let her abandon him.

"I'm going after her!"

He felt Minori take in one large breath. She let that breath settle in her gut, gathered herself up, and touched her right hand to her lips. Then she took her hand, and...

"All right. Takasu Ryuuji—here's a giant farewell for you."

"Huh?!"

...she lightly hit him on his lips. When she saw Ryuuji's surprise, her mouth bent up like a child who had successfully managed their mischief.

"Takasu-kun, you go from the left. I'll take the right. Taiga left her bag in the classroom, so she's probably headed to the breezeway to get it. We'll corner Taiga in the breezeway and meet again there!"

No sooner had she said that than she ran out with her skirt fluttering behind her. Ryuuji also flew from the classroom in a fluster. Minori went to the right, and Ryuuji to the left, aiming for the second-floor breezeway. They were flagrantly violating school rules in front of the student council president as they ran through the halls at full speed.

He would follow after Taiga, and then what? What would happen? The

passion swelling in his chest fueled his speed as he ran. Now that he decided he didn't want to leave Taiga alone, what was he waiting for? He didn't know, but his legs wouldn't stop. It was fine if he didn't know. It didn't matter what happened.

As long as Taiga was there, that was enough.

“Whaaa?! Huh?!”

“Whoa?!”

When Ryuuji and Minori reached the breezeway and came face to face, they didn't find Taiga there.

“How?! Wait, did she get away?!”

He noticed a cold wind brush his cheek. A window was open in the breezeway between the first and second floors. *No way.* The two of them turned to stare out the window. It led to the new school building where their classroom was. It wasn't out of the question that she could have jumped out still in her indoor slippers and already gone back to the classroom.

“The shoe cubbies! The entrance! She can't leave without her shoes, right?!”

“Right!”

They thought about jumping out from the window, but they got unlucky and a teacher stuck her face out of the building next to them. “What do you think you're doing?!” she shouted. They pulled their heads back into the window in a fluster and ended up going the long way around to the entrance that shared a building with their classroom.

Ryuuji didn't think they could catch up with her while going down the stairs. Minori seemed to be feeling the same as she skipped steps while running in front of Ryuuji.

“Taiga! Can you hear me?!” she yelled on some slim chance that Taiga might have been able to hear a floor below them. “Hey Taiga! You always wanted to know didn't you?! I...I also liked Takasu-kun—Takasu Ryuuji!”

She didn't even look back at Ryuuji behind her.

“As your friend, I won't run away from that! I've always liked him! And then I

covered up those feelings because I thought I needed to give him up for you! I thought that you needed him...but I was wrong! I said it earlier, right?! I get to decide what makes me happy! In the same way, only you can decide what makes you happy! I underestimated you! I've decided something! The only way I can be happy is if I do this—if I do it in this way! So...so...Taiga! Show me the way you do things, too!"

When they finally got to the first floor, the remaining students noticed Minori's loud voice and turned around to look. Minori and Ryuuji, both gasping for air, practically collapsed into class 2-C's shoe rack.

However, Taiga was already gone. Her shoes were missing, and they didn't even know whether she had heard Minori.

"Ugh..."

Minori squatted down and covered her face with her hands as she turned down. Ryuuji thought she was about to cry.

"What is that...?!"

"I-I think it's from when I fell down just earlier... I've been tasting blood this whole time. Damn it...I hate this."

When he peeked at Minori, he saw blood dripping from her nose.

Since the nurse already left, Minori stopped her bloody nose herself in front of the mirror.

"Wait, has it stopped yet? Could you stop looking at me like that?" Sitting on the bed, she covered the bottom half of her face with her hand.

"You scared me. I thought you were crying."

"You thought I was crying?"

"Yeah, of course, that's what any normal person would think."

That would have paid off—Minori softly mumbled and gave him an embarrassed smile. Taiga had gotten away from them, and since they didn't know what else to do, they had gone to the nurse's office to at least get Minori

first aid.

“I decided I wouldn’t cry anymore. Takasu-kun, you asked me before how you could keep facing forward, right?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“And I told you that you have to decide to do that. Do you know... Do you know what I ‘decided’ for myself? I’m going to try my hardest to make my dream come true. In order to do that, I have to stop worrying and crying, and continue moving forward—that’s what I decided. Regardless of reality, this is how I’m doing things. If you understand that, then I think all my work has paid off.”

Minori pressed at the plug she had put up her nose and smiled.

“The reason I’m working so hard is because I’m stubborn.”

What she started talking about then in a bright voice was her younger brother. She talked about her little brother, who had continued playing baseball, gone to Koshien Stadium, and was aiming to eventually become a pro. Then she talked about how she couldn’t keep playing baseball because she was a girl. She talked about how her brother’s dream was prioritized in her family, and how her own dreams were postponed.

“I want to keep playing softball. I want to yell out that my dreams are big, and they’ll come true for sure, too. But I don’t have the skill to join a team after graduating high school. That’s why I’m going to save up and get into an athlete’s college where I can keep playing softball. Then I’ll aim for the top—I want to get into the all-Japan pro team.”

“So that’s why you work all the time...”

“Yep. I was just too scared to put it into words. I was sort of thinking that people would laugh at me or something. But now I want to tell everyone outright. I want to yell it from the rooftops so everyone can hear—my little brother, my parents, my little league coach, the junior high school teacher who laughed at my dream, the public, the world. I’m going to reach the top! This is what I decided makes me happy and what I’m going for! That’s what I want to tell them. I’m just being stubborn...but I’m going to stop worrying about that, or

crying. I'm going to keep going forward. I want to go as far as I can get by myself. I want to become someone who complains to nobody. I'm trying as hard as I can like that... Even if I cry, even if it's painful, even if it's hard, I'll keep my spirits up and carry on."

Even if I cry, even if it's painful, even if it's hard—when Minori said that and he saw her smile, Ryuuji thought about everyone. He thought about himself, Taiga, Ami, Yasuko. Even if they couldn't say it out loud, they all had something that caused them pain. Some of them probably felt crushed. Some of them had probably given up. The path ahead was long, and no one knew how much longer they could persevere.

It was just that Minori, who was looking straight ahead toward her dream despite the pain, would definitely never change. She would continue to shine as bright as she was now.

Ryuuji found her light blinding, but it was also like salvation lighting the way.

"I'll believe you're trying the hardest you can."

"All right. As long as you believe in me, Takasu-kun, I'm sure I'll be able to keep working."

So that was the reason why Kushieda Minori always seemed to shine so blindingly. Of course.

"So this is about after the giant farewell—actually what *is* a giant farewell? Well anyway, after that, I'm glad I understand what you're going through now."

"Takasu-kun, it's because you tried to understand me. I'm sure that we'll keep showing each other how hard we're working and how we're feeling for a really, really, really long time to come. And that's going to be happening—"

Minori raised a hand to his face. Naturally, Ryuuji put his own hand against hers.

"—for eternity."

"Yeah..."

This love was fruitless.

But the emotions that came to life after it—the bond—was an eternal

promise. Their hearts were open to each other without deception, and even though they hurt each other so many times before, they had grown so much. Maybe others would laugh at them? Maybe they wouldn't be understood, and would be whispered about? Regardless, Ryuuji thought, it was like a journey. They might have taken the long route, and grown disheartened along the way, but they finally made it. He made it to the place where he was putting his hand on Minori's and made it to a time where they made an eternal promise to each other.

"I said everything I wanted to Taiga. I think she probably was listening. I think she heard it...so that's why I'm going to stop chasing Taiga here."

Minori took in a small breath. Then she brought her head up high.

"There's someone else I need to chase down. That'd be someone named Ahmin. She's someone I really want to be persistent about chasing down, no matter how many times she gets angry, even if we end up fighting again. She's someone I want to clash with. She's someone I want to reconcile with. I don't have anyone else I can fight with like that. I didn't even know that I could get in a fight with someone like that. I'm pretty sure there's no one else who would bring out a part of me even I didn't know about...even though it was so much work."

He knew all too well what Ami was like. Ryuuji thought that Minori could probably shine a light on the heart of another person just as awkward as him.

As for him, he thought he might stand one more time—or maybe two or three or countless times—in front of Ami's heart, but at a distance where he couldn't miss her voice.

"Well, how about we go, Takasu-kun? There are places we should get going to."

"Oh!"

"..."

Who would have guessed that Taiga would have actually gone to her job after running away like that? He couldn't have imagined that she'd be that much

more serious about the job than Ryuuji, who arrived just barely in time, or that she would already be standing imposingly right in front of the wagon.

“I...I can’t believe you actually came.”

“Of course I’d come. It’s still a gig even if I’m not working. It’s a job.”

Hmph, Taiga turned fiercely away.

The store owner had put up a sign on the front of the wagon that read “Today: Half-off sale!” in red letters.

It might have been because it was an annual tradition, or because customers stopped when they saw the red-lettered sign, but the half-off Valentine’s Day chocolates sold surprisingly better that day than the day before, which was supposed to be the real day when everyone should have been buying them. There were a lot of mothers who brought their children around and might have been buying them as a snack, and several men who came to buy two or three of the prettily-wrapped chocolate boxes.

Ryuuji talked and moved his hands all day with barely enough time to breathe. Taiga kept her mouth pressed tightly together in a line and didn’t say anything. When he had a break from the customers, Ryuuji tried to say something to her, but when their eyes met, his words got caught in his throat. Taiga stayed, speechless even when her skirt came close to burning on the stove and he grabbed the hem in order to protect it. Even then, she didn’t move.

If telling her his feelings was easier—if he could have told her the things he wanted to share, the things he didn’t want to share, and everything else in a way she could easily understand, then what would he tell Taiga in this moment? What would Taiga share with him? What would come to life if that happened?

That was what Ryuuji wanted to know. He wanted Taiga to feel that whatever came to being would make her glad and happy.

With his mouth still shut tight, he stole a glance at Taiga where she was beside him. Taiga really was like a rock. She was standing stock-still as she was watching the flow of people on the store-lined street.

“I heard Minorin.”

“Taiga...”

While there were no customers, her voice was quiet—incredibly quiet—as she let those words slip from her mouth.

“Don’t...don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing...”

“Don’t laugh... Don’t look at me. Don’t turn toward me.”

He imagined she must be bright red to her ears and probably didn’t even have her eyes open. There was an incredible amount of shame in her voice as she spoke.

“Don’t laugh... Please. After we finish with work, let me tell you something. If I try running away...then make sure to catch me. Please.”

Like he’d ever laugh at her.

“Sure.”

Who would ever laugh at Taiga’s feelings?

As Ryuuji kept working, he visualized a dream. It wasn’t the kind of dream you had when asleep, but the type someone worked toward. He would graduate high school and get a job. Then he would make sure Yasuko didn’t have to worry, and never let go of Taiga, and they would live happily together. No one would laugh at his dream.

He looked at the clock to check the time.

Once work was over, he would know the answer. He would chase after Taiga, decide he would never let her go, ask her to tell him her feelings, and see with his own eyes whether something came out of it.

“Were you lying?”

But when he heard *that* voice, Ryuuji dropped the envelope filled with his wages.

“You lied to me, didn’t you?”

“Uh...”

He wondered how long Yasuko had been there, on the store-lined street that ran along the national highway. How long had she been watching Ryuuji and Taiga? Taiga also swallowed her breath and froze in place.

“Mom...”

“You’re out of time. I’m going by the condo, so get your things together.”

Yasuko was standing under a streetlamp wearing only a down coat over her loungewear. A Porsche was stopped behind her.

“That’s your...mother? But...”

It was a woman with even lighter chestnut colored hair than Taiga, put up in a relaxed updo. The woman’s stomach was huge. Her features were beautiful in a way that didn’t seem very Japanese, and she had a quiet expression. Taiga had just called her “Mom.”

Taiga had said things with her mom had been going swimmingly, but when the woman walked briskly toward Taiga and tried to grab her hand, Ryuuji reflexively pulled Taiga close.

“D-don’t touch me! Don’t ever touch me again!” Taiga yelled at her mother.

It was obvious that her relationship with her parent—if that was her parent at all—was obviously not going swimmingly at all.

“You must be Takasu-kun, right? I heard from Mr. Aisaka that you’ve been very close to her. Thank you. Please forget about my daughter. There was a situation, and she’s been cut off from the Aisakas, so she’s going to be living with me and my new family.”

“Wh-who said I have to live...with your man and that kid?!”

As if she were spitting fire, Taiga shrieked with rage. She tried to hide behind Ryuuji and trembled.

“Wh-why?” said Ryuuji. “What’s going on? I don’t get what’s happening...”

“Taiga-chan’s mother came by our house to look for Taiga-chan. We couldn’t get a hold of you through your cell phones, so we ended up going to the

restaurant you said the two of you were studying at, Ryuu-chan. But you weren't there either, so I called Kitamura-kun. Kitamura-kun told me you were working a part-time job here."

"I have a good reason for this—"

"I'm not going to ask why you did it!" Yasuko looked as though she couldn't see anything else as she raised her voice. "You promised you wouldn't work! But you lied to me, Ryuu-chan, and broke your promise! I can't let you do that!"

"You can't let me do that... Then what am I supposed to do, according to you?!"

Ryuuji had his own piece to say as well. He wanted to tell Yasuko that her anger was unreasonable and that she was being one-sided.

"You collapsed because you tried working extra for me! In that case, I'll work in your place! What's wrong with that?! We're family! Isn't it obvious that we should be helping each other out?!"

"I don't care how other families are doing things! In our house, you're going to focus on studying! You're not allowed to focus on anything else! I won't allow it!"

"Then...then! In that case! Don't collapse!"

Ryuuji threw the envelope with his wages onto the asphalt.

"The only people who can tell others to focus on studying are people who've saved money up! That's not something you're allowed to say when you took on too much work and collapsed!"

"I barely ever collapse! And even if I do, it's fine! I don't care what happens as long as you study really hard and figure out what you want to do and become a respectable person—that's all I care about—that's it!"

"Just stop it!"

Ryuuji was trembling all over.

So in the end it was just about self-satisfaction? If that was the case, there was no need for him to worry. He shouldn't have had to think about it. Why had he believed that parents didn't have egos?

“Who was the one who didn’t study?! Who was it that threw away what they wanted?! Who was the one who didn’t become a respectable person?! Isn’t this all...just about you?!”

“Ryuu-chan...”

“This is what your parents wanted from you, and then you betrayed them, right?! All you’re doing is trying to redo everything you couldn’t do because of me, but now you’re doing it as a parent! All you’re trying to do is make it so that you can accept it! All you want to do is make yourself a good kid again! In the end, I—”

He watched Yasuko’s face turn blue. Ryuuji watched her face, thinking, strangely calmly, that this was what someone looked like the moment their soul was being crushed to pieces. He couldn’t stop talking.

“If I were never there, you could have still been a good kid! You could have had that life! If I’d never been born, if you’d just never had me, you... My mom would have been happy! That’s always bothered me! You regret me... You regret ever having me!”

He couldn’t stop his tears either.

He couldn’t take back the words coming out of his mouth. Yasuko held her head and crouched down. She was shaking in a strange way, but it wasn’t like he could rush over to her.

His existence was already a mistake. It was wrong.

The days that seemed to glitter and shine, his happiness until that day, the times he’d laughed and cried, his friend’s faces, his worries, the things he’d come to understand—everything slipped away through his hands in the blink of an eye. It seemed to drain out of him. He realized that it all had instantaneously gone to pieces.

“Ryuuji.”

When someone seized his hand tightly, Ryuuji looked over.

“Taiga...”

Taiga’s mother was distracted by Yasuko’s flustered state. Ryuuji grasped

Taiga's hand tightly. Slowly, their legs moved. Then, all at once, the two of them started running.

They wanted to go to a place where there was no one else.

A place where they could be happy just being together.

Ryuuji and Taiga ran, dreaming of a place like that.

Snow began to fall without a sound. Even though it was cold, it never snowed during that time of year.

It was probably the final snow of that winter.

Afterword

Whooooooooa, it's already fall! I can't believe that summer's already over!

I can't believe the one and only 30th summer of my life passed by so casually, without anything happening at all... Well, it's not worth regretting, but when the seasons complete their cycle, and summer comes again, I'll have aged even more. Thinking about it just makes me feel dejected. Maybe the only way to find value for my existence in this world is by trying to live a wise life. Like the little old lady on the Potapota Yaki crackers...

Though I'm in this state, I've successfully been able to bring you *Toradora!* 9 without too much time passing since the last volume. Everyone who has followed along so far, thank you so very much for picking up this book, too! Now that the series has entered its tenth volume, I feel my debt of gratitude toward all my readers piling up. I can't tell you how grateful I am. My readers all feel so close, so familiar, and so powerful to me. I think that getting these books to you is my one sole, certain bond with you all. That's why I'm going to keep on writing more and more! I hope that you'll continue to follow along with me in the future as well!

Now then...I've used up my entire summer this year just taking round trips between my house, the café nearby where I write my manuscripts, and the supermarket. What if I was unknowingly drawing a demon summoning formation by going between these three spots this entire time? What if an unyielding, beautiful demon girl with long, silver, curled twin tails tied up in black satin ribbon were to appear in front of my eyes and say, "You performed the secret summoning ceremony, didn't you?!" What if she had flickering blue eyes, ladylike limbs, a black bustier dress with black lace, and knee-socks that went up to her thighs? "You were the one who summoned me, so I'm going to make you take the responsibility for that! Hmph, what a miserable room! Having to both eat and sleep in this room is so wretched!"

...Anyway, I'd slap her around, make her change into a tracksuit, and then have her clean the room. I'm not going easy on you! First, you vacuum! Next,

you get all the water marks all over the window glass! Then stack all the complimentary copies from *Dengeki Daioh* together! Right, and now do that for the *Sylph* comics, too! Don't you dare forget the bath and kitchen drains! Basically, my house is dirty to the MAX. I've broken my own record for dirtiness. It's so bad, it makes me want to run away. I'm writing this afterword in the café, and that's my (only) choice...

Well, thank you so much for reading all the way to the end! The anime is starting soon, too! Whoa! I need to get ready for the broadcast by at least cleaning up around the TV!

—Yuyuko Takemiya



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